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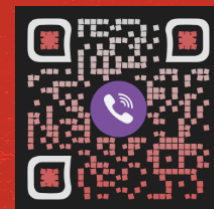
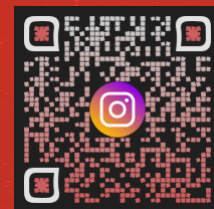
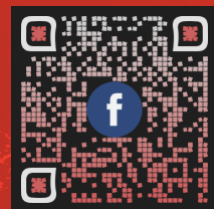
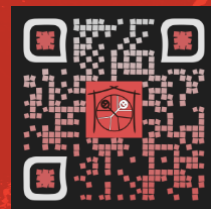


Close Neighbour

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“Helping kids be kids so they can grow up to be better adults!”

Over 33 Years of Working with Roma Children

1990
2023

Close Neighbour

Close Neighbour



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Close Neighbour 1990-2023: Over 33 Years of Working with Roma Children

Team of authors – Pavla Fáberová, Pavla Macháňová,
Johanka Bělohoubková, Marie Papazianová

Translation manager – Anna Onesorková

Editor in charge – Filip Šabacký

Graphic design – Aleš Fáber

Photo – archive of Blízký soused

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Blízký soused

Introduction



At the beginning, there was the enthusiastic individual - Pavla Fáberová (born Knoblochová). After that, there was the commitment of a single family, and over time, there was a team of passionate enthusiasts. After the organization was founded, the activity was built primarily on a volunteer basis. In recent years, we have succeeded in building an increasingly professional team and we are getting better at what we do.

- ▶ **Established on:** November 2, 2010
- ▶ **Main activity:** Leisure and educational activities intended mainly for children and youth coming from the Roma community and living in socially excluded localities based on Christian values. Apart from activities for children, we also offer educational and leisure activities for whole families.
- ▶ **Motto:** "Helping kids be kids, so they can grow up to be better adults!"
- ▶ **Origin of the name:** "A neighbour close by is better than a family far away." - Proverbs 27:10, the Bible
- ▶ **Location:** Pilsen (Czechia) and nearby towns (Nýřany, Chotěšov, Stod, Merklín...)
- ▶ **Activities:** hobbies clubs, tutoring, workshops, project days, trips to nature, cultural events, sports and educational events, summer camps and summer holiday program, trips for families, educational seminars and other seminars.
- ▶ **Scope of activity:** 300+ people per year, 200+ children, 20+ volunteers, 50+ events per year
- ▶ **Involvement in projects:** "Neighbour Day", 72 Hours, Free Time Festival, Lively Street, Pilsen Courtyards

MILESTONES

- 1990 - 2007 supporting the Roma community on a volunteer basis throughout the Czech Republic and abroad (England, Ukraine, Russia, Romania...)
- 2007 continuous activity in Pilsen
- 2008 cooperation with the shelters ("Hope" and "St. Zdislava")
- 2010 the organization established
- 2012 first extra-curricular activities, summer camps for children
- 2013 writing three methodologies on working with children with social disadvantages at summer camps and leisure activities
- 2014 the organization has its first official premises and international cooperation, first summer Scout camp - Bochoř-Javorná (Czech Republic)
- 2015 involvement of Roma employees
- 2018 trips for families with children, first two projects from the European Social Fund
- 2020 new premises in the Komenda building rented from the City of Pilsen
- 2022 first project from Norway Grants: "Family Teaching Family"
- 2023 three more projects granted by the European Social Fund

OUR GOALS

- To support families in building a stable environment for raising their children
- To mitigate the effects of social exclusion
- Motivate the families to effectively integrate into the society
- Provide opportunities and space for meaningful family activities
- To support all-round education and development

TARGET GROUP

- Families with children
- People living in socially excluded areas and socially disadvantaged people
- Persons who lead a risky lifestyle or are negatively impacted by this lifestyle
- Ethnic and national minorities (Roma, including immigrants from Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine and other countries)

OUR PRINCIPLES

- Individual approach
- Free of charge
- Voluntary access
- Discretion
- Encouraging active involvement

2.

CHILDREN'S CLUB PROGRAM

Initially, we carried out club activities in cooperation with two emergency housing shelters in Pilsen.

We were allowed to organize activities in the shelter's communal area for the children who lived in the building. We ran a couple of regular activities, and later added some one-off events. But in order to be really regular

and organized, we desperately needed our own space. Things changed for the better when we found suitable premises in one of the Pilsen schools. Our children all lived nearby and they could attend our activities at any time without having to commute across the city.

During all our activities we try to pass on principles and information to children – and eventually to the adults – that can help them lead a better life. We try to do this in a way that is not forceful, but as natural as possible. We started running various hobby clubs even before the organization was founded in 2008. At first, we cooperated with the shelters, because we had no premises of our own for the first few years. At the same time, families in the shelters were typically our target group. Organizing activities in the shelter's communal area had many advantages. We could easily go door-to-door around the building to pick children up. There were two shelters for mothers with children we cooperated with: the “St. Zdislava” shelter

and the “Hope” shelter. We worked with both older children (in the afternoons) and younger, pre-school children (in the mornings). At the same time, we also began cooperating with the Pathfinder Club, which is a Scout-like, spiritual-recreational-activity program designed for children. Petr and Meggy were two volunteers who helped us run the separate “Scout Group” for Roma children. They visited the shelter every week and organized sports games, crafting activities or fun educational activities. They also took the kids on trips to nature, or to the Zoo. In 2010, we took over and continued with the activities. Two groups, one group of 10 children and one group of 15 children, kept meeting at the shelter.



Over time, some of the families we were in touch with moved out of the shelters into rented apartments in the centre of Pilsen city. And we wanted to continue meeting them. When we acquired our own premises in 2014, it was a big relief. We also needed storage spaces for our summer camp equipment. We managed to establish cooperation with a Waldorf school, whose management was very supportive. We were able to get not only storage spaces but also two rooms for our activities. Thanks to the support of the Youth in Action project, we painted, furnished and slightly renovated the rooms on our own. The room was located in a very

strategic place on John Hus Square in Pilsen city. The surrounding houses were mostly a part of socially excluded localities. The children who attended our hobby clubs and tutoring sessions lived mostly on the square or in the adjacent streets. Once we had our own place, we were able to expand the range of our provided activities. Before our extracurricular activities, we met with the children for tutoring sessions to help them with homework or to practice reading, math and other skills needed for their school classes. Our extracurricular activities included board games, music sessions and crafting sessions. One of our activities aimed



at developing key skills and knowledge. We named it “Letters and Colours” and it has kept running until today. The Waldorf school also allowed us to use their gym for various sports activities. We ran a regular sports class in the gym, and a few larger sports events for the whole families (Christmas party, Easter party, St. Nicholas party, etc.).

In 2017 we moved within the same building from the first floor to the ground floor. We had a smaller room available, because the school needed to use our original space. We expanded our activities to include board

games and an English language class. Playing board games teaches children to follow the rules and develops a variety of skills such as logical thinking, strategic thinking, fine motor skills and more. The English language class helped the children learn basic English vocabulary, and understand why it is important to learn foreign languages. In 2018, we expanded our activities for preschoolers. Children between 2 and 4 years old attended two morning activities per week, and joined some of the activities for other age groups. We also started meeting with the parents. We shared information with each other,



and worked together on preparation of various crafting activities.

In 2018, we had to move again. The Waldorf school expanded and needed to use all its rooms and premises on John Hus Square. We moved to a new address, Palova 19 in Pilsen. This address was further away from where our children lived, which was a disadvantage. For us, it meant that we had to pick children up in their homes and bring them to our activities and clubs using public transport. On the other hand, the premises had a kitchen available, so we could open a cooking class. At our new address, we also started lectures for adults as part of the “I already know WHY”

project. This project allowed us to expand our range of activities for adults. We organized lectures on topics such as financial literacy, parenting, pregnancy, internet safety, smoking, etc. and invited experts in the fields to speak about those topics. Since 2020, we have organized project days on various topics, both indoors and outdoors. On each of the project days, an expert is invited to speak to children and introduce a given topic in a fun way. the topics included navigation in a city, or how to keep our teeth healthy.

Just before the end of 2019, we moved into our current premises in the “Komenda”



building. It is located in a former law faculty at sady Pětatřicátníků 27, Pilsen. The building is owned by the city of Pilsen. The city council decided to renovate the spaces and rent it to non-profit organizations. We were very lucky to have been selected as one of the four organizations! Before we moved in, there was an extensive renovation of the space, and we had the opportunity to share with the city council how we imagine the space to look like. We now have a spacious large room where dance, ping pong, music classes, and various community events can take place. We also have an additional room available for hobby classes, for mothers with children, or for workshops and tutoring sessions.

The premises also include an office and storage space. We can use a part of the garden too. We have worked hard to furnish all the indoor and outdoor spaces and create a cozy environment.

We have provided new tables and chairs. We purchased a new sofa in the red colour – the colour of our organization. We also provided new toys and educational tools for the children. We purchased two folding ping pong tables and a foosball table for the large room. For our sports activities, we bought big gymnastic balls which we keep suspended in nets on the wall. We equipped the large room with a set of speakers

and a projector. We worked round the clock to adjust the outdoor spaces, too. We levelled the ground using soil and sand. We bought a wooden sandbox, two raised beds, two compost bins, a wooden fence and a children's climbing frame with a slide. We also paved a part of the outdoor space, built a garden gazebo with a shed. We provided a trampoline and an outdoor grill. We planted fruit bushes, trees, herbs, strawberries and a few flowers in the garden.

Our activities in the first two years after moving to the new premises were limited due to the Covid pandemic, but we are excited

about the new spaces! In July 2020, we organized a Summer School project. The purpose of this project was to help children catch up on the knowledge they missed due to many schools being shut down during the pandemic. We also provided a space for music rehearsals for the Roma group Le Chhavendar. In 2022, our premises also hosted the project “Effective Health Promotion for People at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion” organized by the Czech National Institute of Health. From 2023 onwards, we have hosted a follow-up project called “Promoting Health in Families.”





We also regularly use our large room to distribute clothing and household items to needy families. Before Christmas, we fill the room with gifts to give away to children as part of the "Christmas Shoebox Project." Four to five afternoons a week, we run after-school hobby clubs and tutoring sessions – our core activities. Children can use the opportunity to complete their homework with us, prepare for tests or entrance exams, practice their math skills, read books

and encyclopedias from our library. We use the children's study materials provided by schools as well as supplementary printed worksheets and available online materials. We also play a variety of board games to promote logical and strategic thinking as well as fine motor skills. We also host diverse workshops, project days, sleepovers, and community events for families (Advent wreath crafting, St. Nicholas Day, Health Day in the Garden, and more).



Support Options for the Education of Roma Pupils and Students

Education support is a cornerstone of our work in promoting inclusion. Our team includes two professionally trained educators and three graduates of a leisure-time pedagogy course. This topic was also the focus of our colleague Johanka Bělohoubková's thesis during her studies in Primary Education at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen: "The Issue of Socially Disadvantaged Children in Education with a focus on the Pilsen City region."¹

In all our activities, we emphasize comprehensive education for both children and adults, fostering talent, overall development, and positive learning experiences. We aim to create opportunities for success,

especially for children who struggle with learning. For many, this is a new experience that motivates them to continue learning. Since 2014, we've been running a regular tutoring program, currently helping 80 children. Tutoring, along with interest-based clubs, is an integral part of our program. Children work on their homework with us, practice math, and read books, atlases, and encyclopedias from our library. We also play board games designed to enhance logical thinking, strategic planning, and fine motor skills. Education isn't limited to club activities, it's also a part of our one-off events. We intentionally design these events to be fun and engaging for children and their families while offering opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge. Examples include learning about animals at the zoo, practicing swimming at the local swimming pool, and exploring physics and chemistry at Techmania Science Center. By trying new activities and learning together, both individuals and the community as a whole gain confidence and a sense of empowerment.

In August 2024, an online questionnaire about the education of Roma students was sent to the principals of all 272 primary and secondary schools in the Pilsen Region. A total of 64 respondents completed the survey, with the majority (81%) of respondents being school principals. The remaining responses came from deputy principals, teachers, school counselors, or school prevention specialists. The aim of the survey was to map the issues related to the education of Roma pupils and students, explore possibilities for effective support, and assess schools' interest in implementing awareness-raising activities by the organization Close Neighbour (such as discussions with pupils and seminars with teachers). Detailed survey results, including graphical visualizations, are published on the organization's website.²

Key Findings

The survey confirmed that Roma students tend to achieve average or below-average academic results, highlighting the need for support measures to achieve equal academic representation. Collaboration with nonprofit organizations for parent communication was positively viewed by 36% of respondents, making it the second most highly rated support measure. This aligns with our experience: both families and schools value this collaboration. Many principals, who have no previous experience with this option, value this opportunity as beneficial. This is very encouraging for us.

Available online in Czech language:

- 1. <https://blizkysoused.cz/kvalifikacni-prace/>
- 2. <https://blizkysoused.cz/dokumenty/>





Eliška Brotánková

Co-worker and supporter

Age: 23

Field of study: Social Work
student at Hussite
Theological Faculty

Personality portrait

I first learned about Close Neighbour in high school from a classmate, Marie. Over time, however, she went from being just a classmate to one of my closest friends and I wanted to learn more about organization she practically grew up in.

What I like most about this work is the sense of belonging with the other workers. Even though we differ in age, gender, ethnicity or fields of study, we share a common goal: "Helping kids be kids so they can grow up to be better adults!"

I have had a desire to help people since I was a child. It was

"I have no idea what the future holds, but one thing I know for sure - this organization will forever have a place in my heart!"

also one of the reasons for my decision to study Social Work. When I helped someone, it was always within the family or friends, but I never worked for an organisation before. One day, a friend of mine contacted me and asked if I would

like to join a trip with the children they were taking care of, and I knew immediately that I wanted to give it a go! Amazing trip to the Prague Zoo took place on August 16, 2021. We met early in the morning and took a bus we booked before. There were a lot of children, so we divided them into smaller groups as soon as we arrived and then walked around the zoo with them. Many of them were at the Zoo for the first time and I was glad I could be there with them.

I became very interested in what the organisation does, and I decided to continue cooperating with them.

I regularly visited the childrens' club, I tutored the children, helped them with their homework, played games or went on walks with them. My involvement in activities for children or even whole families became more and more frequent. Some of

the non-regular activities I participated in were trips, art workshops for children and food drives.

After these experiences, it warmed my heart to know that I was doing something that was helping others and making their lives better! In retrospect, I regret that I didn't start volunteering sooner. Today, I continue to work for this non-profit. The kids, even some of the adults, have grown very fond of me and are always happy to see me.

Working with people can be challenging, but it makes me feel happy and rewarded. I have no idea what the future holds, but I know one thing for certain. Even if for whatever reasons I stop working here, and I sincerely hope that I will never stop, this organization will always have a place in my heart. It has taught me so much more than how to interact with people or run a kids club. I am convinced that I have personally grown a lot during my cooperation with this organisation, not only as a social worker, but more importantly as a human being!



Bits and pieces of life

"What are we going to make today? I love crafting!" Ester is Pata's favourite leader because she runs crafts and art workshops, and Pata loves those. The children enjoy crafting activities immensely, and we are happy that they develop their fine motor skills, creativity and boost self-confidence. There aren't many places where our children hear that they are smart, that their artwork is beautiful, and so on...

"Inclusion means equal opportunity?" If one child has a broken leg and the others are healthy, then letting them participate in the same race is hardly an equal opportunity. Equal opportunity in this case is proper diagnosis of their injury, follow up treatment, rehabilitation, recovery, training, and then running the same race with others. Our children are socially disadvantaged, and more often than not, they had nobody to consistently develop their cognitive abilities in the early years. Nobody was reading bedtime stories to these children, nobody taught them the names of colours, or counting, names of trees, road signs, and many other things. Children are not used to hearing information, remembering it and then being praised for a result, they may appear "slow" and undisciplined at school because they are simply not able to keep up with children who have come to school already knowing a lot. What we are trying to do is help them catch up with what they have missed, at least a little bit. Our "Letters and Colours" club is the flagship of this effort. If socially disadvantaged children have nobody to help them catch up with their peers, placing them in a mainstream classroom is a punishment for all parties involved. They would ideally need a year or two in a smaller class, with an assistant, before being put in a regular class along with everyone else. For many years, we have been patiently sending our suggestions relating to the shortcomings of our school system to our ministers...

"Are we going to church?" Our Roma children ask us, no matter when or where we meet. We are happy that they do not find church service boring, but we are also proud we offer a wide range of activities beyond church.

"Will there be a hobby club at Christmas?" Our children ask us eagerly and they are very disappointed when there isn't. Holidays might be great, but if there is nothing interesting to do, they are not so attractive anymore. We keep track of our children's attendance and we are often surprised how many of them come to our events every year, how many attend regularly, and how much they remember. The attendance can be found in our annual reports, and we also know that children who attend tutoring sessions tend to achieve better results at school.

"Does he love me or not?" Romani girls have the same problems like all the other girls. They want to have a happy family, kind husband and healthy children. We really hope they will have all they wish for one day! But hoping is not enough, which is why we often talk to girls about relationships, birth control or the importance of choosing the right partner for life. We are often the only source of information on certain topics for them and we believe it makes a difference.

"Will Koli be there?" The boys often want to know if our men will be present at an event – it really matters to them. Positive male role models are generally hard to find in our society, and as far as education or extracurricular activities are concerned, they are even more scarce. This is mainly because the wages of social workers, education assistants and similar professions are too low to attract male employees. This why we are infinitely grateful to Koli for his selfless dedication and the support he provides to the boys during our sports classes. It is thanks to him that the boys learn much more than just chasing a ball. They train their discipline, learn to follow rules, and they find out that if they want something, they need to work hard for it, and often break sweat.



Tereza Šašková

Co-worker and supporter

I first learned about this organization when “The Secret Millionaire” was aired on Czech TV, because organization Close Neighbour participated in the show. I was intrigued by what they do, and noted the name on my phone. About three years later, I was reading through my phone and saw the note. I felt this was the right time to ask if they needed an extra pair of hands. And surprise, surprise! They did need it!

As soon as I walked into their premises for the first time, I felt peaceful and comfortable. Working at Close Neighbour absolutely fulfilled my desire to selflessly help those in need, and it was compatible with my studies. What I find the most fascinating is the love and pas-

sion that Pavla and her children have been giving to their work, even in times things were difficult. They are able to help a lot of other people at the expense of their own comfort, which is something that deserves respect and admiration! Working with the Romani people may not seem very popular nowadays, which is what makes the work of the Close Neighbour team even more admirable. They do not listen to prejudice, on the contrary: they promote mutual respect and try to build bridges between the majority population and the ethnic minority.

At first, this kind of work was very challenging for me. The stories of children and families that I got to know

were sad and sometimes hard to believe. At one of the tutoring sessions, I was helping a 10-year-old boy with his homework. He lived with his mother and other siblings in a shelter. One of the questions he had to write an answer to was: “Do you like your apartment and the place where you live?” He answered: “Yes.” I asked him what he liked most and he said: “We are all there together, me, my mother and my siblings.” Hearing his answer, I understood that no matter what environment a child grows up in, family ties and community are the greatest security that children need.

This experience made me realize that having someone to support you, someone to share your worries with, is one of the most important things that give us the needed security in life. Close Neighbour also provides a kind of “security”, a safe environment for those who otherwise don't have it available.

Working at Close Neighbour has completely transformed my worldview, given me an opportunity for tremendous professional and personal growth, a lot of new friends, and made me believe that big changes do not require major initiatives and actions, but rather small steps, made persistently over time. These small steps can gradually make a huge difference for the whole generation of people. I hope that, in the future, I will be able to give back to the organization at least a small part of what it has given me!



Personality portrait

Bits and pieces of life



"Lída and Zuzka have been attending a regular school since September and are doing just fine!" Children can bring their homework to our after-school clubs. Many have improved their results at school. This year, two 13-year-old girls have been transferred from a special school to a regular school. In 2015, Lída attended 23 of our activities and events, and Zuzka even 31 and it brings fruit! Both of them also participated in our summer camp. We believe that their success is not only a result of tutoring sessions, but also the result of being part of a stable environment, with stable values, that gives them a feeling of security.

"Is that a cow?" Seven-year-old Verunka inquired. In our Letters and Colours club, we teach preschool and early elementary school children a little bit of everything. We try to provide basic knowledge in various areas and we do not assume that the children already know things. After visiting the local Zoo, we review how tall a giraffe is, we sing songs about animals, we review how tall a giraffe is, we sing songs about animals, with basic knowledge. Our Roma children have nobody to teach them. When teaching Petr, he thought that "horse" is about 3 cm tall, because that's how big a horse was on a picture he saw. When we explained to him that an actual horse is taller than that, he looked surprised. This is what our Letters and Colours club is about, we try to fill in the gaps.

"I'll have two candies left!" When my oldest daughter was 5 years old, she was great at adding numbers up, but subtracting them was a struggle. So, I asked her how many candies she will have left if she has 5, but her siblings eat 3 of them. She knew the answer right away. When we teach children, we try to use examples from daily life as well. Our children are amazing and we are proud of them! David knows how to write his name, Lucy can recognize a giraffe, Kuba is great at singing, René can count, they all already know the rules of several board games.

"I love Gawwd!" Roman has a tough life. He's 8 years old and he's taught things at home that he is not supposed to be taught at all. Sometimes, he steals, he lies, but he says that he will not beat his wife and that he loves God. Roman still has a lot of struggles and moral dilemmas ahead of him and spelling words correctly is the least of his problems. We want to support him when he is faced with those struggles and has to make important decisions!



Jana Ferková

Co-worker and supporter

Four years ago, I moved to Pilsen with my children, and I hardly knew anyone here. I was recommended to check the organization Close Neighbour by Sonia Horváthová, who used to participate in their activities and seemed very excited about it.

What I like most about working at Close Neighbour is how kind everyone is and how they try to help the children. Many families couldn't afford to pay the entrance fee to the Jump Arena for their children, for example. It's like one family here – everyone can help each other mutually.



I am very grateful for the opportunity to work at Close Neighbour. My daughter got her high school courses paid for, as well as regular tutoring and preparation classes for her entrance exams! Before I learned about Close Neighbour, my children were just sitting at home. At Close Neighbour, they have a regular schedule, tutoring, dancing classes, etc.. On behalf of the whole family, thank you so much!



Ondřej Medve

Co-worker and supporter

I found out about Close Neighbour from Marie Papazianova. She approached me once asking if I wanted to help out on a trip they were organizing, then later, to help with tutoring children, and so it all started...

One of my best memories is the Teambuilding trip that gave me the opportunity to get to know my future colleagues and their partners and children. We spent our time walking around the area, and holding bobsled and sled races. I also enjoyed the ski lessons when I taught Juri how to stand on skis - while I only went skiing



about five times in my life myself. But we did a great job!

We were served "colourful" lunches and dinners, which I found slightly funny, because what I got was, for example, a piece of chicken with a side dish. They tried to make the dish more interesting by adding things like cheese on the chicken (I am gluten-intolerant).

I will continue to be in touch with the organization, but only help out at major events. I have always known that working with children is not really my cup of tea. I wanted to give it a try and do something good.



Age: 22

Career: Controller in Pilsen heating plant

3. ONE-OFF EVENTS



We believe that children learn best through experience and through their senses, so we try to make our activities as diverse as possible. We invite the children's parents and relatives to come and join our regular activities. We are convinced that spending time together as the whole family benefits everyone involved.

In addition to the regular activities, we organise several one-off events for different groups every year. Through these events, we want not only to diversify our activities, but mainly to expand the perspectives of the community members and show them ways to spend their free time meaningfully. We believe that children learn best through experience and through their senses, so we try to make our activities as diverse as possible. We invite the children's parents and relatives to come and join our regular activities. We are convinced that spending time together as the whole family benefits everyone involved. Parents see the relationship we have

with their children and can trust and appreciate our work, and they have an opportunity to spend time together as a family, and attend activities they otherwise would not have attended. We get a chance to see the whole family dynamics, which then helps us to better tailor our support to the individual needs. The children themselves always enjoy the activities most when their parents are present, and it makes the activities even more memorable for them. Our activities can be divided into four categories, each with different purpose, number of participants, and venue: community events, educational events, trips to nature and motivational events.



Community events – Are our largest events. They are intended for high number of participants (tens or lower hundreds of people for outdoor events). We organize events in the premises of our children's club, or directly near the homes of our clients. Whole families are always invited, and the events are "open" for public. Thanks to these events, we remain in touch with the whole community throughout the year and deepen mutual trust and relationships. At the same time, we introduce to the families what we do, so they understand better how we work with their children. We sing songs, say nursery rhymes, and perform small theatrical, dancing or music performances. Teens and parents help

with the decorations, costumes, props, they work at various stations and contribute to the program, for example, as St. Nicolas, angels, devils or theatre characters. Our traditional community events include: Christmas and Easter festivals, costume events, St. Nicholas' Day event and workshops focused on making related festive decorations.

Educational events – We regularly try to visit various places and events that are not only fun, but also have an educative value. We also try to make our regular events enjoyable. Our aim is to show that learning and entertainment are not necessarily separated, but there are many activities that combine both!



This helps the children overcome their resistance to learning. We try to show families that exploring new learning opportunities can be fun as well as useful. We encourage natural curiosity which is essential for a healthy relationship to learning. We try to visit various exhibitions as well as one-off events that are interesting for the families. We regularly visit the Science and Technology Centre "Techmania", Zoos, the aquarium "Akva Tera", swimming pool, theatre and other places. On top of that, we try not to miss interesting and unique

events. For example, we attended the introduction of the first Bible translated into the Romani language and published in the Czech Republic.

Trips to nature – Outdoor trips are one of the activities we have been doing for many years. At the beginning, before our association was established, we didn't have any premises or funding. Trips to nature did not cost much, as we only needed to pay for a bus or train ride. We then took a small hike, searched for

geocaches, played outdoor games, learned about nature, and towards the end of our trip, we roasted sausages over a campfire and visited an outdoor workout area. Even today, we still try to organize an outdoor trip at least once every two months. We believe that being active outdoors has many benefits. Children love outdoor trips and we are happy that their parents often choose to join us, often

with their babies in a pram. For us, this is a precious time, because we have a chance to spend several hours together with the families, chat with them and often casually discover new problems or needs of both the children and the parents. In this way, we may learn about an issue that they do not share during our regular meetings, either because they are ashamed, or because there is



no convenient time for sharing. Spending time together in nature again deepens mutual trust and relationships. We can get to know everyone better. While we walk, we talk about trees, history, animals, ways to navigate through the environment using a map, and so on.

Motivational events – Every six months, we arrange a motivational event for each group of the children attending our extra-curricular activities. They are events to reward the children for their active involvement in our events, for helping in the garden, for making an effort, and for attending the tutoring

classes... We try to motivate children positively, not negatively. We praise them for proper behaviour and their various achievements. We find that more effective than criticizing them for failure. Unfortunately, many of these kids often try their best, for example at schools, but their results are still below average. This makes them frustrated and they often lose motivation to learn or to make an effort. Which is why we try to make these events enjoyable. Children are often invited to decide about what they want to attend as their "reward." Most often, we go to the Jump Arena trampoline park, go-karting or laser games.



Bits and pieces of life

"Penguins, lions, monkeys, flamingos!" Our children's knowledge of animals is growing exponentially! Real animals are always easier to remember! The management of the Zoo of Pilsen has been so kind that they have repeatedly provided a special discount for us. We visit the Zoo several times a year - sometimes with parents, sometimes without parents, sometimes with volunteers, sometimes without volunteers. Dear Zoo, thank you very much for your support!

"Pavla, I saw you in my dream today!" Jan shouted at me when he saw me in the street. Of course, I was very flattered. The ensuing conversation revealed that I was there as the organizer of a soccer tournament, not as a princess dancing in a flowery meadow, but I was still flattered.

"This was my best most beautiful day." Meliska told me after our train ride. Trips with the Roma children are always very intense and I was very happy that this time, the experience was so beautifully cute!

"The Amazon river flows through Prague!" Okay, this one was our fault. We confused Renata (15 years old) during our sleepover in Prague by giving her a quiz with one of the question being "Which river runs through Prague?" and the options a) The Amazon river, b) Berounka river, c) Vltava river. Renatka only remembered the Amazon river, so she selected it. Fortunately, we got to see Vltava river in Prague with our own eyes so many times, that it will be impossible for the children to forget this! Sabina (10 years old), who did not participate in the trip, asked me later, if we flew to Prague by plane, when it is so far away (it is a one-hour car drive). Well, there is still so much to learn! And Jan, who was with us on the Prague trip in January, came to us all excited one day: They discussed the monuments in Prague, and Jan knew a lot about them after the trip. He even knew that the Powder Gate Tower was named like this because it was used as a gun-powder storage place in the past. It's not very common for these children to shine at school, so every achievement like this motivates them a lot! We are happy that we could help him with this one!

"Are you part of the Tretra Orienteering Club?" We were flattered when one of the real orienteer asked us this question. It seemed we looked professional. Skryše 2016 is a traditional local orienteering race. Our navigational skills might not be the best, but we have all enjoyed the race and finished in a good place within the children's category!

"This year was a bit wilder, and the boys were well-behaved!" Praise from a football referee, who bravely officiated our football tournament, for the second year in a row. It made us feel very proud! In 2018, the tournament was only possible thanks to the financial support of a few individuals, because the donation we received for the tournament did not cover all the costs, especially the rent of the football pitch. We are very grateful for all donations and grants, and we are doubly grateful to the individual donors who make us less reliant on the official grants and give us larger flexibility in our work. If we organize a tournament, we want to provide snacks, medals and trophies - it wouldn't be the same without those little things!

Ivana Sušilová

Co-worker and supporter

I first learned about Close Neighbour in my previous job. In the past, I worked in a furniture company. This company provided the organization with office cabinet organizers as a donation. One day I noticed a bulletin board with a flyer promoting a donation to an organization. The intermediary between the company and the organization was Pavla's husband, who worked at the same furniture company at that time.

It was Pavla's husband, who was a close colleague of mine, who introduced me to what Pavla's organization does. He mentioned his wife and her organization a few times and told me they take care of Roma children. I still remember his words: "You and my wife would definitely get along!" One day, I showed up at their children's club and met Pavla.

"The work that this non-governmental organization is doing is both unusual and unique because of its focus on the Roma minority."

First impression? The environment, the children and the room were all great, but

it was nothing compared to Pavla's radiating personality! That was really something that left a deep mark on me. Her friendly and warm welcome, her enthusiasm and joy that I visited her, her positive attitude, her beautiful words about Roma children, it was an unforgettable experience. The second meeting is also worth mentioning. I was walking through the streets of Pilsen and suddenly Pavla on her bike, with a smile on her face, shouted at me: "Hi... how are you doing?" This little thing made my day.

What impressed me the most about working here was the enthusiasm and passion radiating from Pavla and the kids. I was impressed by how they managed to align their personal lives with their activities in the organization, how they adapted their family

relationships to their work relationships, how they chose their fields of study and jobs

in a way that benefited the organization.

The work that this organization is doing is both unusual and unique because of its focus on the Roma minority. They dedicate all their efforts to the development and growth of potential of Romani people. They are trying to point Romani people in the right direction and make them appreciate values that they originally did not consider important, even though they are important! For example, the value of education, a career, decent housing, quality leisure time activities, the value of status in society, and faith.

I have been active at Close Neighbour for about five years now. My family and me

started visiting the organization in our free time. As immigrants from Slovakia, we were unaware of other services in the city, so I was grateful to have found the organization, especially for the sake of my then five-year-old son. Together with them, we took our first trip to Karlovy Vary and another to a beautiful castle. Thanks to the trips we got to know the Roma community in Pilsen, which was a great benefit for me and my son. Over time, I became an active member of the community and participated in the activities run at the organization. I was doing various things, from cooking at the summer camp to preparing, organizing or carrying out trips and events. Within the organization, I now independently organize trips

and events for children and families from Nýřany, because my close family and me live here. This also demonstrates that the activities of the organization expanded beyond Pilsen as such. Thanks to organization, the Roma community of Nýřany, which also faces various kinds of challenges, can experience many beautiful moments!

My relationship with Pavla and Close Neighbour is "bearing its first fruit." Never in my dreams would I have imagined that I would one day study at university in Pilsen, that I would work in Social and Health Care, have a leadership position, or that I would be able to help other Roma people. I would not have achieved all this on my own.



Bits and pieces of life

"These kids are like blank slates!"
This is how an experienced ornithologist from the animal rescue station assessed our zoological knowledge. Luckily, he hadn't heard how Paja mistook a bat for a mosquito, and Martin thought that the squirrel was a wild boar. Oh well, we are working on it! On the other hand, we performed great at the costume party organized by the Paprsek dancing group.

"We had a lovely time! Everyone was there! When will be the next sleepover?"
"I didn't get any sleep. The kids were wild until 4 AM and I was this close from throwing them all..." The sleepover is one of the traditional events that children and leaders tend to have very different memories and experience of. Despite this, we organize one every year. Sometimes, I wonder why we are torturing ourselves like that!

"Oh, I am sorry." Our 8-year-old gentleman apologized when he was reminded that you go to the toilet of the Chateau Český Krumlov through the door and not through the window! Otherwise, the trip was great. We had a great guide who did not overwhelm us with an endless list of dates, but selected the most essential and memorable things from our history and even counted bears with us.

"I am so tired! I really need a break!" Tom tried this strategy after walking 400 meters into our trip. When he saw that no one would carry him or pity him, he happily walked another 9 km. This is often a new experience for our children, that the world does not revolve around them, that the adults don't always cater to them, whenever they complain. That making a little effort of their own can bring a lot of satisfaction and fun, such as climbing a tree stand, or playing in the leaves!

"I feel like an adult, like I am going to work and all," said little Martin after visiting Go-Karts. This spontaneous statement was a nice surprise to me. Funnily enough, the link between adulthood and work is definitely not something he knew from his own family. His father left before he was even born, so he grew up with his mom and two older sisters. His mom was too busy taking care of the children and stayed unemployed. Even if Martin learns this only thing from the interaction with us, we are happy!

"Mirek did a belly-button jump!"
Someone dives with their hands first, someone with their legs first... But Mirek has to always come up with something original. To perform his original diving style, you have to bend your whole body like a bow and jump so that your belly button is the first to touch the water. Going to the swimming pool is one of the most popular attractions among the kids. It feels great to come with the younger kids and see the older kids already there, because they came on their own! We taught them to swim, and to go to the swimming pool on their own when they feel like it...



Karolína Kamenická

Co-worker and supporter

Age: 28
Career: Data analyst

I have known Pavla, or rather Close Neighbour, for many years. We met thanks to my classmate and later best friend, also called Pavla, who is Pavla's eldest daughter.

What I admire about Close Neighbour is the care they give to children who do not have it readily available in their lives, and who must grow up in a difficult

environment. Close Neighbour gives these children a lot of joy and valuable experience that they might not otherwise have the chance to get. It helps them build a useful basis for their future life.

My wish for Pavla is that she continues to create smiles on children's faces and keep her enthusiasm for the cause in the next decade!



Radek Macháň

Co-worker and supporter



Age: 34
Career: Project manager

I first met Pavla and the Romani children from Pilsen at the Pathfinder summer camp in 2010. A group of four Romani children attended the camp organized by our club from Prague. We did typical scouting activities with the attendees. To tell the truth, it was sad to see how big the difference was between the level of knowledge and skills of most of the kids and the kids from the Close Neighbour organization. It was obvious that these kids were not used to spending time with a group of other kids or being in nature at all. But even after one week, there was visible progress. The Romani children started integrating into the group, their ability to follow the camp routine improved, and so did their practical skills. I became so interested in working with these children that since 2013, I have been directly involved in organizing the summer camps for Close Neighbour.

What I like about Close Neighbour the most is how it positively impacts children and their families. You can see how the organization itself is evolving, too. I've had the opportunity to watch the organization

evolve from the very beginning and there has been noticeable progress. The group of active volunteers has expanded, and the organization now even has permanent employees. Our friends from the Roma community have also joined the activities.

The work is very unique, and enormously physically and mentally demanding. You get to see children in very poor conditions, which they could not influence. They can only try to use the help at the organization and slowly build a better life than their parents have.



Bits and pieces of life

"What nationality are the kids?"

they asked us as we admired the Hot Springs at Carlsbad with our Roma kids. Apparently, they were not used to Roma tourists there. And in Prague, they talked English to us: "Rent a car? Good shopping! Friendly price!" to which our boys reacted in Czech: "I'd like to live in Prague, it's very beautiful, such a shame I don't speak English." Even in Prague, they were not used to tourists from the Roma community at all. They probably thought I was a pale Indian with a bunch of kids. Maybe one day our children will start a Romani Tourist Club, so the majority society will get used to it...

"They're so cute!"

Petr, otherwise a tough guy, smiled. While feeding the ducks and the swans, we learned how to recognize mommy duck and daddy duck. We also saw deer along the way. There is nothing better than seeing animals with our own eyes, because looking at pictures in books is simply not the same experience! We also visited the interior of the Kozel Castle, which reminded us of our summer camp "Knights and Princesses." The children surprised us, because they were well-behaved during the whole tour. Big thanks to our guide who was understanding and patient! The kids loved the potty under one of the beds and curiously explored other items of the exhibition, too!

"Do snakes wear pyjamas?"

The staff of Akva Tera aquarium park had to answer these and other expert questions asked by our kids. For three days in a row. There are so many of us that we had to make three separate trips. We liked the animals very much, broadening our horizons. For example, in front of the aquarium building, we had to explain to the kids that the fish do not talk, that the movie "Finding Nemo" was an animated movie and a fiction...

"Fun after hard work."

Just like last year, we took the kids who had helped us at other events go-karting. Boys and girls alike had volunteered to help us prepare and run various competitions throughout the year. Most of the games and competitions were about the Bible, introducing stories from the Bible in an entertaining way.

"Look, it's a kangaroo!"

Shouted an 11-year-old Denisa excitedly, when we spotted a deer during one of our hikes. It seems like we have to go to the Zoo again soon! "Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?" sang a 14-year-old Andrea when the kids were asked to sing a song they remember, featuring an animal. Because she was dead serious, we explained to her what "wool" was. Neither Denisa nor Andrea are stupid, they simply never received much attention in their lives... Which is something we are trying to fix. Our trips are not only about nature and exercise outdoors, but also about expanding our knowledge and overall preparedness for the challenges in life.

"We will go to the yeast!"

Romanek waved his hand and indicated where we should go. Compared to other teams participating in the orienteering race, our team was somewhat unusual. However, where we were lacked in knowledge, we compensated with enthusiasm and team spirit. We finished in the wonderful 3rd place in the children's category!

Bits and pieces of life

"What a cute little hedgehog!"

I was impressed with the snout and paws of a hedgehog during one of our trips in Pilsen - until my husband carefully pointed out to me that the hedgehog was still for other reason that I originally thought... It was February. Except the hedgehog, another thing that caught our attention was a poster with an invitation to a concert of folk music group Hop trop. The gentlemen on the poster were not nearly as cute as the hedgehog, but they made it through February alive, and we got a chance to attend their amazing concert in Pilsen...

"She cannot go, she has a toothache!"

Denisa's grandmother told me at the door. The eight-year-old Denisa was still babysitting her four younger siblings, while her other two brothers played outside. Mommy and daddy were not there for them. Grandma takes care of all seven kids. I admired the grandma greatly, but this time, I did not give in, and insisted to take Denisa with me to the weekend "Robinson" event. Like I thought, Denisa had no toothache, and she had a great time! There were eight Roma children and about two hundred "Gadjos", as the Romani community call the non-Roma people.

"Will you take me on a trip? Can I join the summer camp? Why didn't you come yesterday?"

The kids are great, and there are a lot of them. Really a lot. More often than not, I am not sure if I should be happy about that, or sad. Because they like our events but our capacity is limited. Many of the kids are little, and they only know "yesterday, today and tomorrow."

"We want to see Karlstejn castle!"

Karlstejn castle was a trip that the parents requested. Trips with parents are often marked by short distances and higher attractivity. We're glad that the kids can go together with their parents on some of our trips. These occasions make it possible for the young-gest kids to join us, who would not be able to attend on their own. The key take-away for the children is that trips can be organized by families, not only non-profit organizations. We hope to inspire the parents to undertake a trip or two of their own!

"Panda is from Asia and the kangaroo is from Australia, and that's what I remember too, from our summer camp."

Meliska in Prague excelled, recalling knowledge she learned during one of our summer camps. The event called "Where does chicken live?" was great fun and the kids enjoyed it. Thank you very much! We also learned that some people are blind, and tried what it feels like not to see anything. That experience taught us a little bit about being understanding towards people with disabilities, and showed the kids that they are not the only ones in the society with some sort of a disadvantage.

"I can't keep going!"

Petr shouted at us in despair. But it was a race, after all, so Petr summoned all his strength and continued. In life, sometimes we all have to keep going when we are tired. It's good to learn early on that when I want something, whether it is winning a race, or getting a good job, a family, I have to make an effort, not give up. We were very proud of the children - they tried their best, and carried home with them not only finisher diplomas, but also a sense of achievement. It was great for them to know that they can beat a lot of their competitors when they give it their all. They will remember this better than a day spent sitting in front of a screen.



Václav Vondrášek

Co-worker and supporter

My name is Vašek Vondrášek, I was born in 1971, I'm a pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and I was involved in the work of Close Neighbour in the years 2011 and 2012.

When I think about it today, it was a great journey that taught me new depths of humility and patience. When we took Romani children to summer camps, where I played my part, it was always an adventure, often moving on a very "thin ice", but fortunately, it always had a happy end... When we started organizing Romboch (Romani church service) events, I was always nervous for a few days, worried about how it would all turn out. Transporting the children by car was always challenging. More than once, they jumped out at me while driving, so I often (which I rarely do) had to raise my voice to keep them seated. It was a bit of a miracle they we managed to arrive alright... The sermons themselves were great, I felt everyone was able to cooperate and enjoy the time, but still, as soon as I dropped them off at their homes and drove back home,

I always breathed a sigh of relief. I always felt emotionally drained. Each time, I was reminded of Jesus's words: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me..." And that's why I'm also very grateful for this whole experience. I greatly admire everyone who takes care of these children, like Pavla and her whole family. I wouldn't have been able to do it for such a long time and with such a passion as they do it... With respect, gratitude, admiration and prayer for this whole ministry. Vašek



Václava Smetáčková

Co-worker and supporter

Vendulka is our ray of sunshine. She is truly admirable and serves as a role model for many people around her. Despite her age and the challenges of her youth, she continues to dedicate herself to volunteer work, offering support to seniors in day care centres and nursing homes. Her vitality is something many would envy!

Pavla's father is my relative and childhood friend. That's probably why I became little Pavla's godmother at her baptism. Life took us down different paths, and it wasn't until years later that I reconnected with my goddaughter and her beautiful children. I remain in awe of what they dedicate most of their lives to – the Close Neighbour organization.

My first invitation to the Christmas "Romboh" event left me deeply impressed by the incredible outcomes of Close Neighbour's activities – after-school clubs, trips, theatre performances, tutoring sessions, and summer camps. Everywhere I looked, I saw the smiling faces of children they lovingly call "their" children, or "their Roma children."

Over time, everything has continued to grow and flourish. Their patient, tireless efforts have borne

fruit – whether through new collaborators among the children's parents, the joy of seeing some children excel in school, shine in music or dance, or simply grow up with the understanding that kindness and responsibility are values worth upholding in life.

Thank you, Close Neighbour, for allowing me to be part of your world. You have my deepest admiration. Godmother Vendulka



Age: 74
Career: Volunteer

Bits and pieces of life



"When are we going to play in the bubble again?"

The boys keep asking me. The 2017 Football tournament in the inflatable hall, called "the Bubble", was a real success. We invited friends from the Roma Plznatar association, whom we helped to found the association. The game was played with a lot of enthusiasm, goals were scored, it was great!

"The Neighbourhood Day - The Health Day - The John Hus Square in Pilsen filled with children again!"

Our cooperation with the projects of the Czech National Institute of Health made it possible for us to attend the traditional Neighbourhood Day and the Health Day. In addition to the traditional large bubble maker and rope attractions for children, we also had the opportunity to talk to adults about healthy lifestyle and health in general, such as how to wash your hands properly. Trying out special glasses, everyone could try out how a drunk person sees the world!

"Luckily, I didn't get slapped."

One of the moms was preparing their kids to leave with us. She slapped all of them as a prevention, so that they don't get lost. As for me, she only scolded me a little, because she was afraid that if something happens to the kids, she might get arrested. I assured her I am the one who would, in such cases, bear all consequences. Visibly relieved, she brought her youngest son to join us. Life is hard on some people, and we all have our own fears, and our own motivations...

"Daddy is

here as well!" We are very happy that our events attract more and more parents. One of the dads, Ruda, came with all his four sons and his wife to the Indoor Playground in Lině by bus. He visits the city part Lině regularly because his relatives live there. But it was his first time visiting the playground. After this, the whole family came to the Indoor Playground a few time on their own. This kind of family time and experience is essential for the healthy development of the children.

"These animals really exist!"

David exclaimed in surprise when we witnessed a car hitting a deer during one of our trips. The kids were speculating whether the deer will not be eaten by bears, so I explained to them that the forest wardens will come pick it up. And we agreed to visit the Zoo again. This time, we were a group of 50 people: three volunteers from the Give and Gave initiative, four moms, two Pavlas from the Close Neighbour, and 41 kids. We all had a great time!

4 SUMMER CAMPS • AND OVERNIGHT EVENTS

"When one falls, both get warm!" Fourteen-year-old Thomas tried to memorize a verse from the Bible: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow..." Nevertheless, we are happy that older boys return keep coming to our events and do their best to complete the tasks.

During the 12 years of our summer camps, 164 children have attended our camps, and the total number of participants was 404. A large number of children return every year. Two children have already attended 8 of our summer camps, seven children have attended 7 camps, nine children have already returned six times and eight children

five times. New children keep coming, most of them are siblings, relatives or friends of the children who already attended. 12 already grown-up children have joined the summer camps as part of our team, taking up the roles of cooks, counsellors or simply volunteers.

Summer camps

Our first experience with summer camps, not yet organized by us, took place in 1993 and 1994. We collected our first valuable experience and learned more about what it entails to take Roma children to summer camps. We learned that certain rules must be followed, that we cannot bring children we do not know well, or with whose parents we don't have a good relationship. Also, we needed to provide outdoor equipment for children whose families can't afford it.

Another big inspiration for us were the scout-type camps organised by the non-profit organisations Pathfinder Club and Royal Rangers. For several years, we kept attending these camps with a small group of Roma children. We learned a lot of useful games and activities; we learned how a good day should be organized. Another valuable cooperation was with the non-profit organization Kvítek, where we were also able to send some of our Roma children. And then, in 2011, we also attended a "Police" summer camp. A group of police officers repeatedly organized a summer camp for socially disadvantaged children whose parents often had



clashes with the police. What an excellent idea! This allowed the children to have their first positive experience with the police.

But as the group of children interested in our activities grew over the years, we got to a point where it was no longer possible to take only small groups of children to camps organized by other organizations. And this is when we made the decision to start our own summer camps. For the first three years (2012–2014), we only organized one run of the camp. Since 2015 onwards, we have added another run every summer. This allowed us not only to accommodate more children, but also to divide the camps into the girl's week and the boys' week. This worked really well for us. We could modify both of the camps to better suit the gender

and the hobbies of the individuals attending the given week. Separating boys and girls also removed some tension between the children, and removed the danger that they will pay each other visits at night.

Our first summer camp took place in 2012 near Konstantinovy Lázně as part of the project Váhy (Scales). It was a 10-day camp with the theme "What am I going to become?" During these 10 days, we kept introducing different jobs, and towards the end, the children had several test interviews where they "applied for jobs." Throughout the camp, they collected various certificates in different subjects (science, English, strength training, cleaning, math, reciting some Bible verses ...) and depending on how they did in the exams, they could then apply for suitable jobs.



For example, for a cleaner, only the Bible and the cleaning exam were required. If they applied to become a doctor, they needed to pass almost all the exams.

The next year, 2013, the theme of the camp was "Knights of Love." We enjoyed the beauty of the surrounding mountains, as well as the assistance of the hut warden. With his help, we visited the local underground bunker, designed to defend our country in the past, and the zoo in Dvůr Králové. And then, there is a story I will never forget. One of our team members could not find her pocket knife. And so, we announced that we

will not start breakfast until we find the lost knife. Young Michal immediately volunteered and started searching for it. After a while, he came back saying he needed someone to help him. He told the other boy that he looked for the knife everywhere, everywhere except for one of the drawers in the hall. And the boy indeed found it in the place where Michal "forgot" to look! Michal had various diagnosed disorders, he attended school for children with special educational needs, but he handled the "lost knife" situation brilliantly.

In 2014, another important figure entered the scene. Aleš Fáber – the second husband



of the organization's leader – was a brave man who did not panic and run away from a woman taking care of five children as well as the local Romani community. He was convinced that a proper summer camp must be Scout-style camp – with tents, teepees, field kitchens and all. Everything else is cowardly. But he did not only speak about it, but went on to build such a camp. All right. Let's openly admit that the first year of the Scout-style camp was rather challenging. We had trouble raising money, so our camp did not take place until late August – a period of summer with already pretty cold nights. We also didn't have as much equipment yet, and one week before the announced start, we did not have much more than a stretch of an empty field. For the first two days, we wandered through the forests nearby, looking for suitable wood



poles for the teepees, the kitchen and other purposes. Of course we had all the necessary permissions. The canopy over our kitchen was rather short, and the other accessories were barely suitable for our needs, but somehow, the summer camp turned out to be a success, and left everyone with many wonderful memories.

In the following years, the mayor of Bochov, Mr. Egert, provided us with better materials to upgrade our field kitchen, he helped us mow the grass (we have another kind volunteer, Mr. Vaňousek, helping us with that a lot, too), and in times of draught, he had drinking water delivered to us by volunteer firefighters from Bochov. Last but not least, he allowed us to sleep over at the Hartenštejn castle several times, which usually marked the ceremonial

ending of the summer camp – and was the perfect place to carry out the “knighting ceremony.” Thank you very much for all the assistance!

Since 2015, we have been organizing two runs of the residential summer camp. The camps always have a unique theme. We have already had Indians, knights, agents, rescuers, sailors, cowboys, Israelites and their exodus from Egypt, we had construction of the railroad in the Wild West, and Noah's Ark. Our traditional daily program begins with a warm-up after we wake the children up.

After breakfast, we carry out the morning hygiene, we give children points for the cleanliness of their tents, and after that, we have a “morning story”, which is typically a short moral story. For the rest of the morning, there are themed workshops where children work in groups, learn new knowledge and skills. Depending on the camp theme, the workshops deal with various topics and skills: meteorologist, sailor, interpreter, scribe, carpenter, farmer, architect... After we have had snacks, the children help with various activities necessary to run the camp; they fetch water from a nearby well, they collect



trash left behind, they help prepare wood for the kitchen stove and campfire, and wash dishes after lunch.

Lunch is followed by a lunch break. During the break, we offer a few non-demanding activities, and for the more active children, we offer an opportunity to play football or go for a bike ride. We constantly try to channel their energy in the right direction, especially at the boys' camp, so that they don't get into fights and other kinds of mischief.

The children can use a colourful bulletin board to review the information discussed during the workshops, because they take exams in these topics later. The exams are designed in such a way that everyone can easily pass at least one of them. We never forget to compliment the children on how smart they are and how well they studied. This is a major moment for them, because not

many of them have experienced much success and appreciation at school. Some of the exams are hard to pass, because we want to give children a challenge, and find special talents that stand out. We need to know, for example, which kids have a good chance at a high school, which kids will do great at vocational schools – because crafts are once again in high demand on the job market.

In the afternoon, we organize team competitions and games, whether in the camp directly or in the surrounding forests. Evenings are dedicated to knowledge quizzes and singing songs around the campfire. Typically, the summer camps have a one-day “special event” or trip, for example a trip to the children's rope centre, the swimming pool near Sokolov, or one-day rafting down the Ohře river.

Overnight stays for families with children

Children who have attended our camps often carry away lot of memories and enthusiasm. Over time, their enthusiasm started to rub off on their parents, who voiced their interest to experience these activities as well.

Many of them “missed out” on them as children and saw an opportunity to catch up now! At first, we had our concerns, as we don't feel comfortable having some of the fathers around. But in the end, we took the leap of faith, and we applied for a European subsidy for family trips with children. The second attempt was successful, and we had a green light to start organizing overnight family weekends and family weeks as part of



the “I Already Know How” project for families with children in 2018. The project lasted until January 2021, and in that period, we organized 11 weekends and 7 week-long events. We had 82 adult participants and many children, staying in different places.

Family getaways and overnight stays have many advantages. Mothers and fathers can unwind, stop thinking about chores and cooking, and enjoy the moments spent together, instead. We discussed important topics, such as money management; what happens if I spoil my child too much; what happens if children don't attend school; how to choose a partner for life - this was not only relevant for teenagers, but also for some mothers with already five children of their own. During the adult discussions, we had other people taking care of the kids. We also went on hikes where we learned about different tree types, we held

running races or walked over logs. In the evening, we had a fun night game, for example in the basement. Everyone enjoyed it a lot. Evenings were also great opportunities to play knowledge games – we made up our own questions relating to the place where we were staying or the topics we were discussing.

Another great benefit of the overnight stays was the fact that we could talk and reflect about each other's lives. We could comment on some parenting methods, such as “Just give it to them so that they stop crying.” We had the opportunity to show parents that setting boundaries works for both sides. It was kind of funny when some kids listened to us more than their parents. We, on the other hand, were inspired by the Roma culture and the way the families stick together.



Sometimes, we watched inspirational film together, such as the Butterfly Circus, or films about Jesus for children. After watching a film, we tried to understand the message, and to understand our lives better. Luckily, everyone seemed to know how to solve other people's problems, so that was a start.

Each of the events was unique. Each event was shaped by the participants, the weather, the relationships between the participants, the severity of various addictions. We only allowed adults to smoke in designated areas, so those individuals who were used to more freedoms could get very grumpy. Fortunately, this was rare. Overall, these family events turned out better than expected. For this reason, we have included

these events in our next major project, the "Family Teaching Family" project that was financed from the Norway Grants. Thanks to this project we were able to organize eight overnight events for a total of 121 people between 2021-2023. In addition to our favourite places in Šumava, we also visited the safari zoo in Dvůr Králové. We continue to try to include educational overnight events in our upcoming projects because we know how beneficial they are for all the participants. Through various games and activities, all participants collect new valuable memories, parents expand their parenting skills and families gain inspiration on how to spend quality time together.



Overnight Events

Residential events include popular sleepovers at our organization's premises. These are always an intense experience for all involved, however, not everyone has the same memories. While the feedback from the children include: "It was great!" "Everyone was there!" "We ate the biggest pizza in the whole world!" "We had an amazing time!" The supervisors, on the other hand, keep saying "I didn't get any sleep." "They were up until 3 a.m. and then started going to the toilet." "Never again!" We often ask ourselves why we keep

doing this to ourselves. But the children love it so much! And there is one more advantage: When we need to go to a more distant place for a trip, we really need to leave early in the morning, and a sleepover event guarantees that the children will get up on time. Additionally, these events give us an opportunity to get to know the new children better—we can find out whether these kids can manage to sleep outside their homes, and if it will be possible to take them to our summer camps. The sleepover program traditionally includes a knowledge quiz, big pizza, a night game in the basement, and watching films.



Bits and pieces of life

"I have to collect some iron, so we have money for dinner..." In Pilsen, some of the children have to face quite a different type of challenges than most kids. 14-year-old Christopher often peers into garbage cans late at night, using a flashlight. This issue has no easy solution. I wouldn't have been able to do what I do if I weren't able to pray to God, to cry and to ask Him for help and strength. As for some issues, we are unable to solve them in our own power...

"What do you want to do after you finish elementary school?" "Why, I will apply for unemployment benefits, of course..." Valeria was surprised when I asked this question, the answer seemed obvious. I hope that after the summer camp, she will reconsider her plans. These children desperately need to broaden their horizons, to step out of stereotypes, to find motivation, and to see different options and values than those that surround them at home... Summer camps are indeed one of the effective ways to introduce these new perspectives. We must hope that they will carry this inspiration away and not forget it after the camp is over...

"We are looking forward to it sooooo much!" That's how the children feel about summer camps. The pandemic measures in 2021 have made it impossible for us to organize some of our traditional events, and made everyone very excited about our next summer camp, with 22 boys and 16 girls on two separate runs. We had a lot of fun, played games and pondered about spiritual topics. The theme was "Journey to the Promised Land" and we learned about Egypt, Israel, Moses and God's actions towards people.

"Let's launch the boat into the water?" Our children's self-confidence is absolutely unlimited. Our wooden boat had no bottom and it was in a poor shape. Yet our kids had faith that we can use it. ☺

A fifty-year-old Romani man told us: **"I felt like a completely different person during the trip. I'd go again in a heartbeat..."** And then there was one mother, who made her first bike trip with her 9-year old son. A mom and dad with five children, also experienced a bike trip for the first time with us. A dad of two sons - the older one is eleven years old - was on a trip with his children for the first time. Another family was in the pool for the first time with their four children. That is a lot of "first times"... Our list could go on for a long time. We are really grateful for everything we could do within the "I Already Know How" EU project. We are happy for every inspiration and every nice memory that we were able to create...



Age: 31
Career: Pharmacist

Valerie Jelínková

Co-worker and supporter

It was June/July 2013, just after high-school graduation, and I travelled to attend baptism of my friend Ada from Jeseník city. Ada arranged for us to travel together with the Papazian/Fáber family from Prague, who were also attending the event. Ada also told us to look for people whose hair looks like “curly sheep” and who are impossible to overlook.

“I think we were missing 5-10 rested adult leaders in optimal condition every year to reach full capacity.”

And she was right. We soon began to suspect that the uniqueness of this family didn't stop at hair genetics. When Pavla later talked about their organization and plans for the summer, we knew immediately we want to be on board. Two months later, we arrived at her summer camp. I was so confident, having experience from organizing summer camps from before. But... Uhh... This was truly something different! If you haven't experienced it, it's hard to imagine how hard it is to handle children who are not used to obeying anyone else

beyond their parents (and who knows if they obey even them). But we managed to pull it off, and neither of us, neither the children were discouraged.

Next year, we attended again, with an ambitious plan to build our own campground in a bare meadow (more accurately, a dried-up swamp). Luckily, we had Aleš! Another chal-

lenge was convincing the children that our tents and teepees are not medieval torture instruments. Back then, I think none of us knew what we are up for. I remember that some children arrived wearing only dress and flip-flops, but with bags full of chips. It was an adventure, both for them and for us.

Since I was studying in Hradec Kralove city, and my sister in Prague, our activities with Close Neighbour were limited to helping during summer camps. The curiosity of

what new adventures we would face, and the realization of how much more challenging the camp would be for the rest of the team if one volunteer is missing, these two things always motivated me to come again and again each year. We were always amazed at how much the girls and their brother Koli managed to organize and do in the past year (on top of their own studies), and how far the kids have come since we last saw them. We are still amazed.

The camps were better and better every year. The more experienced camp attendees were able to help with the activities and enjoy themselves. The summer camp was their reward for working hard the whole previous school year. Younger children learned from the older ones. But not only kids were developing – so were we, the adults, and our whole camping site. The camp was located in a truly magical place, surrounded by forests. In the evening, when everyone is asleep, it is truly beautiful.

But I must also admit that every camp I attended left me exhausted. Thinking about the sometimes very harsh life stories of the children and their families, but also the constant attention, trying to prevent conflicts between the boys, who wanted to deal with each other

“their way”, or the feeling of helplessness when some situations escalated too much – each day left me physically and emotionally drained.

These difficulties never discouraged Pavla. Every year, she made it happen, no matter the circumstances. Discussion on how many more children we can take on, were often very difficult.

When I started my first job, I decided to support Close Neighbour financially. I am aware that I have only seen a small part of all the hard work that is needed.

In 2022 and 2023, we were successful in our application for the DiscoverEU Erasmus Travel Project. Because of it, I have had more opportunities to meet some of the organisation members, and some of the parents of the children as well. We meet on Sundays in Pilsen, read the Bible, and discuss the preparation for the trips.

Close Neighbour has become my second family during these few years, and I am very grateful for all the moments we spent together. I'm still amazed at how this whole thing can work, all thanks to the effort of one family, and the people that were inspired by their passion!



Bits and pieces of life

"Going to fetch the Death March medal too?" Someone in a soldier-like uniform asked us as we were walking up the hill. I thought he was making a joke, because we were out of breath, but he wasn't. Accidentally, we found ourselves in the middle of the World War II memorial event. We enjoyed every bit of it! Everyone greeted us with a kind "Hello" and smiled at us. That doesn't happen to us in Pilsen.

"We want to go to camp too!" Our children's parents have been demanding for years. Thanks to the European project "I Know How", we were finally able to make it possible for them. Educational trips with experiential and educational activities for parents and entire families have proven very successful! We will continue to implement them in other projects as much as possible.

"Pavla, I've got glasses now!" Roman shouts as soon as he enters the room. He attended our summer camp, and he was unable to recognize the wild strawberries 30 cm away from him. He struggled to see the paper when he was drawing. After arriving home, I kindly but firmly told his parents repeatedly that they needed to address this issue immediately. Otherwise, he would perform poorly at school because he simply wouldn't see anything. It worked, and Roman started the next school year with new glasses on. I was very happy for him.

"When one falls, both get warm!" Fourteen-year-old Thomas tried to memorize a verse from the Bible: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow..." Nevertheless, we are happy that older boys return keep coming to our events and do their best to complete the tasks.

"I don't like you!" That's how one of the fathers started our conversation after coming back from the police station. He went to file a report about someone harming his family. In the past, he would handle similar situations with a fist fight, and, in doing so, he would break the law. The police resolved the reported issue to the father's satisfaction, so he did not have to take justice into his own hands this time. We are so proud of him!

"They're with their father now..." In 2017, we had just under 30 applications for the girls' and boys' summer camps with the theme "What Am I Going to Become?" We never know until the last moment how many kids will actually show up. 24 boys came instead of 20, so we had to send 4 of them home, as we had no extra places in the tents. These 4 boys did not come to our other activities during the year, which was the condition for coming to the summer camp. I still felt deeply sorry I had to send them away. There were only nine girls for the second run. One girl cried because her friend didn't show up, and left before we boarded the bus. One participant was a boy – a twin brother of one of the girls. But otherwise, we had a great time. There were various reasons why many girls did not show up, even though they signed up. In one of the families, the father came home from prison after 4 years, and took the girls away (he and the mother did not live together). Nobody knew where they were or when they come back. The friends of these girls also refused to go. In another family, the mother started a new job, and the daughter had to babysit her younger siblings. Her cousin did not want to go without her, so both girls did not show up. It is indeed not easy to organize the summer camps. But we are grateful that we can provide this opportunity to children who would otherwise not be admitted to regular summer camps, as they would not meet many requirements. We are happy that the children keep coming back, that they enjoy the camps, and that the older children already announced their interest in becoming part of the team. We are looking forward to the next years!



Valentina Jelínková

Co-worker and supporter

I met Pavla and her family for the first time in 2013, on a trip to Jeseník city, where we attended the baptism of our common friend. My friend arranged that my sister and I could travel together with them in their car, because they were coming from Pilsen and their car was big enough. It is quite a long drive from Prague to Jeseník city, and Pavla was excited to share with me what she does. I don't remember the details, but we knew in that moment that we want to come and see their next summer camp. Ever since,

must be evident to everyone by now). But can you imagine anyone sane who would throw themselves into such a task, and with such enthusiasm and patience? Pavla has an invaluable ability to entertain children and to pass on values or advice for life through stories. From personal hygiene, financial literacy, avoiding addictions, to choosing a high school or choosing a partner... and many other useful topics that one would usually expect parents to discuss with their children.

“Pavla is, how to put this... completely crazy (This much must be evident to everyone by now). But can you imagine anyone sane who would throw themselves into such a task, and with such enthusiasm and patience?”

we attend their camps regularly! Every year during the summer camps, we try to at least show up, do a little here and there, make some nice pictures. :)

Pavla is, how to put this... completely crazy. (This much

Aleš, Pavla, Johana, Eka, Koli and Marie make up the rest of Pavla's team – they compensate for whatever Pavla might not possess. With their skills and talents combined, they all co-create and continuously improve the organization. It's

actually an absolutely fascinating family.

To be able to watch the transformation process, to get a little insight into the subculture of Roma and socially excluded families, is an amazing and valuable experience for me. Moreover, I don't have to spend a whole year with these children, picking them up from dangerous-looking, shabby apartments and exposing myself to various potential risks arising from contact with their families. That's what Pavla and her family do! And you can clearly see this at the camps. It's hard to say what such a summer camp with these kids would be like if the children and the team didn't know each other

and did not already have mutual trust established between them. I think it would be much more challenging, to put it mildly.

The biggest benefit of the work at Close Neighbour, in my opinion, is showing kids (who often have nowhere else to see this) how the ideal parent cares for their kids. They take them on hikes to nature, trips to castles, trips to the Zoo, to the swimming pool... they help them with school and find suitable extracurricular activities for them... If they understand this, then maybe, some of them will choose not to have six kids, while they take little care of them. They will be able to nav-

igate a little better through life in a society that otherwise mostly ignores them. And they will also know from their childhood that there are a lot of “gadjos” who are quite friendly.

Working with this specific group of children offers many surprising moments. At one of the camps a few years ago, we were out in the field. I noticed that a little girl of about seven years old had something crawling up her leg. I told her to hold on for a moment and went to see if it was a tick. I wanted to remove it before it bites. The little girl jumped up and started screaming. I was surprised and looked at her in confusion, while Pavla ran over to me with a first aid kit



Valentina Jelínková

Co-worker and supporter



and a few other frightened camp leaders. "What happened?!" Everyone thought that something terrible happened. "Well, um... I wanted to remove the tick from her leg before it bites." I blurted out, puzzled. The two of us had to hold the poor girl, who was scared to death, while Pavla removed the tick. A bit later, Pavla explained to me why the girl responded so hysterically to the incident. Some of these families are generally terrified of the forest because they only know it from horror movies and commercials on encephalitis vaccine. These commercials often look like a short horror movie themselves. "Beware! A tick is coming for you!" Some of the commercials feature a man dressed in a scary tick costume... The children naturally have no idea what a tick is, and how to deal with it. They have an ingrained fear that something absolutely terrible will happen if a tick bites them.

Another memory that comes to mind is a part of a conversation between two children aged 9-10, both around 60 kg, which I overheard: "My grandmother loves me the most, and every time I visit her, she

makes a chocolate cake just for me!" Or a request from another child: "Can't you sometimes cook some normal meals? Like bread soup?!" We were also amused by the statement of an 11-year-old girl: "I take after my daddy, only my butt is like my mommy's, because we twerk together!"

On the other hand, I have to say that thanks to this organization, I also met very nice Roma people and their children. Some of them even cooked at one of the camps. Many of the camp attendees were also very nice. It always warms one's heart to see a group of Romani boys competing to see who can pull the biggest tree branch from the forest, and then cut it into smaller pieces with a hand saw, with pride!



Ester Papazianová

Co-worker and supporter

I've been involved with Close Neighbour since it first started operating in Pilsen. At the beginning, my contributions were minimal due to my young age, but as time went on, I began helping with organizing workshops, supervising kids at summer camps, and even cooking meals.

Work in organisation has always been, and always will be, very challenging. In the early days, much of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that my mom had to manage many things on her own. This meant certain areas, where she wasn't as skilled, naturally fell behind. Over time, this pushed us to develop skills that would enable us to build the most efficient team possible. Thanks to these efforts, we've evolved as



an organization – from sporadic interactions with kids to continuous and structured work. One thing we've never truly mastered is separating our family life from work matters, which I see as both our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. I can remember countless birthday celebrations where the main topic of discussion was the upcoming events of our organization.

The biggest challenge, however, comes from the people we are trying to help. Over the years, I've met many incredible individuals who strive to better themselves and overcome life's obstacles, who only need a little nudge. But with others, the work can be extremely difficult. No matter what you do for them, it's never good enough. They don't know how to ask for help or say thank you. There have been many times when our family became the target of cruel gossip from the very people we're trying to help. Each incident is emotionally draining and demotivates us from continuing this much-needed work. A burnt-out person can no longer help anyone, and we should always remember that.



Age: 26
Career: Dentist

Personality
portrait

Bits and pieces of life

"Tomorrow I'll join you!"

The 15-year-old Laco tried to adapt to the program at one of the camps. He was referring to the morning baths in the cold pond, as this was the tradition there. In the summer of 2011, we took 29 Roma children to 8 different camps together with Czech children. It wasn't exactly easy.

"They taught us how to brush our teeth, and to tackle challenges in life."

Two Romani football players said about the summer camps when they visited me. They are already adults and not only do they have jobs, but they also take care of their families properly and play football with their children. When they were young, they attended summer camps similar to ours and it changed their lives. Our wish is that our events will have the same kind of impact on our young participants.

"We're going again next year!"

Koloman exclaimed as we walked out of the camp gates and the children became strangely quiet. Koloman is a born leader, used to making decisions for others. He is nine years old and has six younger siblings. The three oldest siblings attended together with him and as far as I can tell, they had a wonderful time. One of the camp organizers said "It was better than I expected." and I was relieved as I always try to send a smaller number of "our" kids to summer camps with the majority population. Preferably with kids they know from other events or from church services. We cooperate with the Pathfinder Club, the "Kvítek" Club and the Royal Rangers Club and we are grateful for the summer camps they organize!

"No, this is not my sister!"

Emil exclaimed when we were trying to guess who were the teddy bears on his picture. The biggest, pink bear was the mom, which is interesting, because Emil's own mom did not take care of him or his nine siblings. The children were all in the foster care of their grandmother.

"Pavla! Dan peed in Jirka's shoe!"

Dan's brother announced to me. I was flattered by his trust, because what he did was basically "rat his brother out" to the "gadjos". This is very unusual in the Roma community and it shows that Dan's brother was happy to be at the summer camp and wanted to make sure that he can keep coming to our events in the future, too. What if someone blamed this misdeed on him? Otherwise, nothing serious happened during the rest of the summer camp and the brave organizers are looking forward to the next events with the Roma kids.

5. EXPERIENCE FROM ABROAD

Romania, Great Britain, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Finland, Norway, visitors from the United States of America... That is only a few of the countries we have visited, or countries from which we invited guests and organizations who had similar goals as we do.



Young people should travel a lot. Only then will they appreciate what they have at home! It is always easier to solve problems of other people and other countries, than it is to solve our own problems. It is much harder to solve the problems in our own culture. It is one of the reasons why God sends Christians on a missionary work.

Travelling abroad helps individuals to broaden their horizons and grow, it helps to develop friendly relationship with other countries. If you travel with an open mind, you will realize that in every country, there are both friendly and unfriendly people. That every person is sometimes nice and sometimes grumpy no matter where they are from.

Something like a “friendly” nation or an “unfriendly” nation does not really exist. There are only diverse nations with diverse people in them. My friend from Ukraine, who works as a soldier and spends most of his time calculating angles and speeds of missiles, promised me that he would never launch one towards the Czech Republic. I wish he had friends all over the world.

International projects and partnerships have been a stable part of our agenda at Close Neighbour. Not only are they enriching for us as an organization from the cultural perspective, but they also provide opportunities to look at our situation from a different angle, and to draw inspiration from others.



Our employees are not the only ones who try to stay in touch with the international community – we also invite members of our Roma community to participate in various international projects.

Many of the staff members and many people from the Roma community have made trips abroad to various countries, and many people from abroad have come to visit us in the Czech Republic. We travelled to Romania, Great Britain, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Finland, Norway, Slovakia, Hungary

and Poland in order to work with children or to exchange experience with foreign organizations. Various groups from the USA come and visit us as part of their Christian programmes. We hosted a group of Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles as part of the “V4” project, and a group of Portuguese came to us as part of the Erasmus project. Nuria from Spain came for a personal visit. These encounters have always been immensely enriching for both the leaders and the children. We usually communicate in English, which motivates all of us to enhance our language skills.



First experiences, 1990

My first international experience was working with Roma children from Romania. In February 1990, the Red Cross in Strakonice organized an event for children from the Romanian orphanage in Resica. A bus full of children from Romania and their supervisors came to the Czech Republic for a month, and a number of local volunteers were invited to help the children enjoy themselves in the unknown environment. I was one of them. They provided amazing food for us, which was great for the kids, less great for me. One of my friends and I had learned a few phrases in Romanian

prior to their arrival, including: "Sleep tight, my dear girl," "I love you!" "Where is mommy?" – the last one was for us to be able to understand the children in case they inquired about their parents. Shortly after the children arrived, we quickly modified our vocabulary to include phrases like: "Don't touch it," "Be a good boy/girl," "Take turns!" and so on. I really loved the kids and I still remember their names until today. But at the same time, I needed to learn how to set boundaries so that I did not go crazy during this month. My requirements were not too high – I merely wanted them not to jump out of the window, I wanted them to watch out for cars, and not to hurt each other, throw stones at each other

and so on. This experience proved crucial for my future work. The second important thing I learned was that I cannot save everyone, no matter how much I want to. I was very surprised that I sometimes lost it, even though I loved the children. I remember sitting in the middle of a field, praying: "Dear God, if you exist, please help these children, because I really can't..."

When I had to say goodbye to the first Roma and Romanian children, and return them to the orphanage supervisors, it broke my heart. During this month, it felt like they

were my own. In the past, I found it gross when mothers ate leftovers after their kids. However, after a few days spent with these children, I was doing the same thing. I wished I could keep at least two of them, but I could not. So at least, I later hitchhiked to Romania and visited them. When I arrived, I was not allowed to take the kids out, so I greeted them, offered water (the supervisors did not give them enough water to drink, because they wanted to prevent bed wetting). My visit to the Romanian orphanage was dreadful in many ways.



They showed me the infirmary with a medicine cabinet – and it was worse than our portable first aid kit. They said that the Americans had been there and that they had tested the children and almost all of them were HIV positive. This probably happened when the children were all vaccinated using the same needle. The supervisors did not seem worried about it in the least. I later used this story when other people gave me a ride and the atmosphere in the car was getting awkward. After hearing this story, the drivers immediately changed the subject from awkward questions to “This is my wife and kids, I love them so much!” Another strong story

was the one about the playroom in the orphanage which was crammed with toys. But outside, the children did not even have a ball to play with, and when a girl started playing with an empty bottle, she was scolded for it and had to throw the bottle away.

And the list could go on... For example, one of the Romanian supervisors gave us a piece of “advice:” “If you want the kids to behave themselves, take the worst one of them and beat them properly before departure, under any excuse.” No wonder that the kids were a bit wild when they were with me – I did not use the “best practices.”



England, 1994

After graduating from university in 1994, I went to the UK as an au pair, because my father wanted me to learn English. Much to my surprise, I cried like a little baby on the first night upon my arrival. I missed my mom. The rational part of me did not understand – I was a grown-up, a university graduate, and I had not been visiting my parents too much anyway, but my emotions got the better of me. At first, I was babysitting two little girls in Somerset. After that, I visited my father's friend in London.

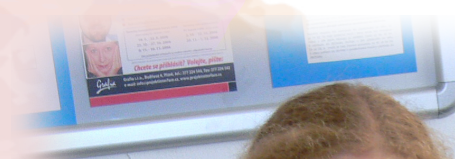
Back then, I was already fond of the Romani people. While in the UK, I was looking for opportunities to meet them. But I only got a chance to visit a Romani community in Wales. I met a lovely Romani woman there, whose faith in God was very similar to mine. She lived in a caravan, parked in the same place for the last 16 years ... When she was 14, she married a widower with seven children and gave birth to nine more. Her husband used to be a thief but is now retired. “But you didn't live in this caravan back then?” I asked her, doubtfully looking at the cramped space she called home. “No, we had a much smaller caravan back then,” she laughed. This en-





counter was an eye-opening experience for me. Whenever I feel that my life is difficult, busy and messy, I often think of this brave woman.

My father's expectation that I will learn English was not fulfilled. I still keep messing up in English, the only difference is that I now have a broader range of vocabulary to mess up. Otherwise, my stay in the UK was a success.



Missionary work in Russia and Ukraine, 2000-2001

In 2000, my first husband and me, together with our first four children, were on a mission near St. Petersburg, Russia. In the following year, 2001, we spent five months in Kolomyja, Ukraine. In 2000, my first husband and me, together with our first four children, were on a mission near St. Petersburg. In the following year, 2001, we spent five months in Kolomyja, Ukraine.

We travelled to St. Petersburg by train. From St. Petersburg, Christians from the Finnish Pentecostal Church, which organized the trip, drove us by car to a camp. This was an intense multicultural experience. In addition to the thousand or so camp attendees, there were refugee Russians from Uzbekistan living there permanently. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians were no longer welcome in most of the satellite states and were forced to leave. The smarter ones left earlier and brought their possessions with them, the less lucky ones had to flee in a rush, some of them did not make it at all.

Our role at the camp was preparing Christian-themed activities for children.

We sang Russian songs, played drama pieces, pantomime activities and so on. We also handed out toothbrushes and toothpaste and explained when, how and why everyone should brush their teeth. There were also children from an orphanage in St. Petersburg, with many Roma children among them. All the children from the orphanage were very poorly dressed, emotionally deprived and very thin. Working with them was very depressing.

Our stay in Ukraine was organized by the Czech missionary organization Nehemie. We had a small apartment rented there as well as some monthly income to live on. At the local Pentecostal church, I helped with the children's programme, talked to the women and young people, and had a few

sermons on Sundays. I improved my Russian skills a lot. My father was not over-excited about my prowess in Russian as he would have been about my English, but my Russian teachers would have been very proud of me. I was always good at math, but languages were never quite my cup of tea. My German teacher at secondary school begged me never to say that she was my teacher. She thought of me as her personal failure.

During my five months in Ukraine, I didn't see many Romani people, except for a few children who walked around begging for money. I didn't understand this until 2008, when I visited local Romani settlements with a group of local Christians from Ukraine. They explained to me the situation in Romani communities. These consisted of improvised huts away from towns, electricity distributed

by extension cords, dry toilets, mud everywhere, tiny rooms, but a TV in every room. When a girl did not marry before 15, everyone was worried about her future. A five-year-old using substances was nothing unusual. We handed out some humanitarian aid, sang a few songs, and left feeling a bit dejected, knowing that the problems of the Roma people were too complex for us to solve. At least, we learned to appreciate what we have at home, and prayed for Ukraine.

Meeting other Pro-Roma organizations, 2014

Another interesting experience from 2014 was thanks to our participation in a Visegrad Fund project. Nonprofits from



Slovakia, Poland and Hungary and us made a couple of mutual visits. All these meetings were unique and very different from each other. In Slovakia, we met people with very optimistic vision, just like ours, and could have a nice chat, because our languages are mutually intelligible. The Slovakian nonprofit we were visiting was small, just like ours, and they faced similar challenges. The Hungarian nonprofit we visited was different – they were a large nonprofit, with sufficient funding and a professional approach, but their approach seemed to have rather missed the people they were supposed to help. When I sent them the itinerary around Pilsen, which included an excursion to the Pilsner Brewery, a visit to the excluded areas and meeting local Roma children, they doubled the number of participants. The Polish nonprofit sent a few people who seemed unfamiliar with the project, and their visit was more of an international trip rather than experience sharing. When we visited Wroclaw, we spent most of

our time taking photos of the local sights. We tried to find and contact the Roma community, but we were not successful. The only item on the official agenda was a presentation in English about unemployment. Halfway through the lecture, I asked what the word “unemployed” meant, and the lecturer almost burst into tears. Her presentation was nicely prepared, with various comparison tables and charts, but she spoke quite fast and many of us (mostly Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians) did not understand much of what she was saying.

Given my level of English, I was surprised when I was asked to translate the final “scientific” conference in Hungary from English into Czech for the Czech and Slovak audience. It was true that an interpreter was needed, but I am not sure I was the best person for the job. However, I seemed to be the only option. To my own surprise, I spoke quite fluently and no one complained. The most remarkable

achievement of mine was being able to drive from Pilsen to Nyíregyháza, Hungary, and I only got lost in Budapest once. Out of our whole team, I was the only one with a driving license and an ability to navigate using a map.

A trip to Slovakia, 2019

Between 2018 and January 2024, I was employed at the Czech National Institute of Public Health. While I loved working with the Roma community full-time, I also needed to support my family. At the National Institute of Public Health, I worked as the Project Coordinator dealing with health promotion projects aimed at people who were at risk of social exclusion and poverty. I worked with the parents of the local Roma children, teaching them how to take care of their health. In 2019, as part of this project, we went on a business trip to Slovakia and visited local Roma settlements. The settlements in Slovakia were very reminiscent of those in Transcarpathian Ukraine, although in Slovakia, compared to Ukraine, there was a visible effort by the state to address some aspects of the issue. For example, they have built primary schools near the settlements, and they have implemented various projects focused on healthcare and health education. This was very enriching and inspirational for me, because many Roma people in the Czech Republic originally come from these settlements. It gave me an insight into their situation, and made me admire them for how they dealt with the challenges, how they managed to move out and start over in a different place – hoping they will be able to get a job and support their families.

The trips we made in 2022

The year 2022 was an exceptionally enriching year with a lot of international experience. Within the framework of our projects, we were able to make 4 trips abroad. In June, four members of our staff travelled to Croatia, to attend the Project “Cleanovci,” an Erasmus+ youth exchange programme. They met with other young people from



Bulgaria, Hungary, Northern Macedonia, Romania and Croatia. The agenda included workshops focused on sustainability and environmental protection.

Together with the Norwegian organization Skyhøyt Live Scene, we held three workshops in the Czech Republic in April 2022, and a trip to Norway in June, during which we organized 8 educational workshops. The topics of the workshops organized by us included the inclusion of Roma children, supporting families through non-formal education and leisure activities, and the role of non-

profits in the education of socially disadvantaged children. Workshops in Norway were dedicated to the situation of refugees in Norway, electromobility, promoting the work of non-profit organizations to the public, the local library system and projects focusing on promoting reading among children in Norway, among other things.

In September 2022, eight members of our team visited a Charity in Oradea, Romania. We attended seminars on how to work with people who have experienced trauma, we visited excluded localities, and exchanged



our experience. In September 2022, we also attended a paddling & river skills course in Austria.

Travelling across Europe, 2023

In 2023, we participated in the DiscoverEU – Inclusion Action – which is an Erasmus+ mobility programme for young people who have less opportunities to travel through Europe. The programme provides an Interrail Global Pass, which is a flexible multi-country train pass, and some allowance to cover the other costs while travelling.

During our activities and, in life in general, strange coincidences tend to happen to us. During one of our meetings with our friends from Norway, an unknown lady sat next to me, and it later turned out she worked in a department dealing with EU projects. It was from her that I learned about the project that provides a free train pass to 18-year olds so that they can explore Europe. She was surprised to learn that the Roma people did not take advantage of this opportunity. I laughed and replied: “For them to be willing to use it, you would have to throw in the money for accommodation and food, and also for some people to accompany them, because not everyone can find their way around in a foreign country.” It was a funny



“coincidence” that, a few months later, we received an offer that matched exactly what we needed to make such a trip happen. We were excited and immediately notified the kids who had attended our summer camps.

In 2023, we made two exploration trips with two groups of 6 and 9 participants. For two weeks, these two groups were traveling through Europe. One of the groups visited Switzerland (Zurich), France (Paris, Nice), Spain (Barcelona) and Germany (Nuremberg). The other group travelled to several places in Italy (Genoa, Rome, Elba) and Germany (Nuremberg), too.

Before the journey itself, we organized a few preparatory meetings, practicing the skills that might be useful on such a trip, such as reading the map, finding bus and train lines, using various mobile apps, and improving financial and language skills. We chose our participants based on how actively they participated in our regular activities as well as the preparatory meetings.

The participants visited a number of interesting places: museums (chocolate museum, Louvre and Moco Museum), aquariums in Genoa and Barcelona, a water park in Nuremberg and other places. These adventures helped the participants improve their digital competence, the use of new applications, and their communication skills in both their mother tongue and foreign language. They also learned how to use map apps abroad, how to search for public transport lines, and how to manage their budget, whether personal or a group budget. After the trip, we collected feedback from all the participants, using a questionnaire regarding their key competencies.

Many of the participants also reported a better attitude towards travel. They are now more motivated and better equipped to travel abroad with their family or friends. In addition to all of the above, they learned something new about the countries around them, and perhaps grew proud of their homeland. The trip had an unexpected impact, too.



Some of the participants suddenly felt the urge to settle their debt with their health insurance company, some found a job to earn extra money. During the trip, they developed noble ambitions and made interesting discoveries, such as: “I’m gonna get a driver’s license!” “I won’t drink so much!” “People here don’t give me the same look like at home, I’ll come back one day!”

The DiscoverEU – Inclusion Action has been the biggest project for Close Neighbour so far in terms of length of stay and the number of participants abroad. It had numerous benefits for the team members as well – they improved their organizational and communication skills, and gave us valuable material to present at future conferences.

The project was beneficial for all participants who would otherwise not have been able to travel abroad, whether for financial reasons, or because they simply lack the necessary skills, the experience and the confidence. The families and friends of the participants saw this as an exciting new opportunity. Most of the community members have never been abroad, not counting Slovakia. We are already getting ready for the next run, and we now have more people interested in the project. Although the project is for adults, many 15-year olds already try to book their place ahead. This shows the impact the project has had on the whole community and how it is already influencing the thinking of its teenage members.





Age: 52
Career: CEO Skyhøyt live scene Manager

Pål Henning Iltstad

Co-worker and supporter

We met Pål in the spring of 2021, when we were preparing to submit our project Family Teaches Family to the Norwegian Funds. At that time, we were looking for a Norwegian partner who would not only give us plus points in the application evaluation, but also ensure enriching cooperation. Pål fulfilled and even exceeded all these expectations thanks to the amount of inspiration he provided for our work, the initiative for other forms of cooperation, and the interest he showed in our efforts and progress.

Pavla's commitment at Close Neighbour has embarked on a mission to foster community solidarity and support through social projects. With a core value centred on humanity, the organisation has spearheaded initiatives to assist individuals with some "extra needs."

a common purpose. This meeting underscored the universal language of mutual respect and the desire to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

As the language barrier diminished, it was overshadowed by Pavla's commit-

"This cooperation serves as a testament to the idea that even organisations working in distinct fields can find common ground in their foundational beliefs, leading to successful and meaningful collaborations."

Our first digital encounter in 2021 swiftly revealed a profound alignment in our core values. Despite some initial "challenges" due to the language barrier, it became evident that our organisations were united by much more than just

ment to aiding those in need and fostering community solidarity. This early interaction laid the foundation for a robust partnership and the potential for collaboration across cultural and linguistic divides, driven by shared humanitarian values.

Results are created through commitment and often manifest as "hidden knowledge", rather than in the form of titles or qualifications. This serves as a tribute to Pavla and Close Neighbour, who contribute to the lives of others on a daily basis.

The collaboration between Sky High Live and Pavla's Close Neighbour is underpinned by a mutual recognition of our core values; a deep respect for human life

and a commitment to providing help wherever possible. These principles have been crucial in forging a strong partnership and have been thoroughly tested.

This cooperation serves as a testament to the idea that even organisations working in distinct fields can find common ground in their foundational beliefs, leading to successful and meaningful collaborations.

Sky High Live, with its inception rooted in the ambition to revitalise the cultural scene, has always prioritised innovation and community engagement. Beyond its primary aim of creating unforgettable experiences, the organisation upholds the core values of respect for others and a commitment to offering support wherever possible.

Stay safe, keep on dreaming!



Bits and pieces of life

"Ronaldo may not have arrived, but many of his relatives did!" - Our visitors from Portugal claimed that they were all relatives of Cristiano Ronaldo. They stayed with us for a week. They were fine young people. Together, we attended an art workshop, we went sledding and dancing. We exchanged about interesting facts about our countries. The thing Czechia and Portugal had in common, as we discovered, was the ability to make a revolution - a coup without any casualties. So we agreed that from now on, we will organize revolutions together.

"Cindy is like a sister to me :-)" I have known Cindy for many years, and although we don't see each other very often due to the distance between us, we like each other, and every meeting feels like yesterday ... The Roma children had an opportunity to practice their English when speaking to a woman from the USA, and they realized again how important it is to keep learning.

"I will never be able to cook as well as you!" Nuria sighed, peering into a full plate of food we gave her. Nuria was grateful and excited about our food. By my standards, I put the food on her plate a bit recklessly, but she still took pictures of it and sent it to her family in Spain, excited about how well we took care of her. Nuria really wanted to come to us for a whole year as part of the EVS - European Voluntary Service, but we didn't get the funding, so she went to Bulgaria for a year, instead, and made a trip to us at her own expense. It was great to see her again and we felt sorry that she couldn't spend the whole year with us.

"Is that snow?" Young people from Portugal visited our organization as part of the Erasmus+ Youth Exchange project. Meeting different cultures was again highly enriching. The Portuguese saw snow for the first time, and they were surprised at the racism we experienced during our activities with Roma children. Some things which we considered pretty tolerable, made them very upset. And we were surprised, in turn, when they told us that the "socially disadvantaged" people who came to visit were disadvantaged because they didn't live in family houses like normal families, but had to rent a flat from the government ...



Sylvain Romain

Co-worker and supporter

Sylvain Romain loves God's Word, he is a free pastor and bridge builder between religions, and is the author of several books. He knows how to overcome prejudices between cultures and draw people closer to the heart of God. Above all, his knowledge of Islam has removed false fears of contact for many and opened up opportunities for life-changing relationships. Sylvain is a brave man who stopped his car when Pavla was hitchhiking on the highway between Brno and Prague.

One day in Vienna, I talked with someone who always travels by hitchhiking. To me, it was funny because when I was young, I did the same. But these days, nobody does it anymore... Except for Pavla.

Two days later, she was standing on a busy highway. I pulled the brake so the whole mess on the back seat fell on the floor. "Hi, my name is Pavla and I am going to Prague." As we talked, we discovered more and more things we had in com-

mon - not only hitchhiking, but travelling, and the desire to help others. Finally, I asked her what Church she is a member of. It was the same as mine! We were truly a spiritual sister and brother!

From that moment on, she visited me regularly to pick up some clothing that people from my church collected in Austria. I am happy to keep her in my prayers and support her in brightening the lives of people she cares about!



"Do not forget: Next time you see someone raising his thumb on your way, it might be another Pavla — or maybe just her!"

Megan King

Co-worker and supporter

My first meet with Close Neighbour team was in summer 2015. I was then grant manager of the US Embassy in Prague. This year I visited the Summer Camp as a grantee.

I was inspired by the work of Close Neighbour. This team operates with a deep empathy and understanding of the life challenges that are faced by

children and families. Organization works with a wide family of volunteers that give their time and energy. Costs are low and extremely reasonable.

As a grant supervisor, I was impressed by the competency and administration side of the organization. As a person, I was impressed by the spirit, love and dedication of the team.

"In the future, I wait for the day when the children who have been part of the programs for so long can step into leadership roles. I can only imagine how they will shape and inform the projects in the future."



Age: 58
Career: CEO Fairventures worldwide

Personality
portrait

Personality
portrait



We call
our volunteers “voluntears”.
This word was created by an accident.
It was a typo that appeared in one of our
photo books, and we did not notice it until
it was already printed out. After a moment of
initial exasperation, the word caught on
and everybody has been excitedly
using it ever since.

6. VOLUNTEERS & EMPLOYEES

Our volunteers, or “voluntears”, as we call them, have a tougher job than volunteers in many other fields. They have to be ready at all times, they need to be able to handle a wide range of dire situations and juggle multiples tasks at once, all while keeping a cool head. Those few people who volunteer for us are like a treasure to us. We will take the best care of them so that they stay with us as long as possible!

People over gold

Employees, volunteers and other supporters are the greatest asset of our organization! We are deeply grateful for everyone who has embarked on this exciting journey with us. We are thankful for everyone who agreed to help us fight some of our battles, overcome some of our challenges. The experience some of them made form the backbone of this book, their lives are deeply linked with ours, and with the lives of the children who turn to us for assistance. We can never thank them enough! Our team is a diverse group of individuals – people of different ages, nationalities, genders and areas of education and expertise. This helps us address a wide range of topics and challenges relating to our target group. The organization has full-time employees, as well as subcontractors and volunteers.

But for most of the time, the activities of our organization depended on volunteer work. In the first years, we did not employ any people. A few years later, we had 1 or 2 employees. These employees worked for mostly a minimum wage, compensated by the Czech Labour Office as part of their Public Benefit Project. This helped us cover not only some of the cost of labour, but also, for me as the head of the organization, this was for many years my much needed source of income. My work included not only the contact with children, their families, and the preparation of activities for them. I was also busy with various fundraising activities, accounting, the management of our website, educational activities for the public, and other social activities where I benefited from my education. It wasn't until our participation in the Norwegian and European projects that were able to expand our team (available in the chapter 11 –

Statistics). Our long-term volunteers formed the core of our now official team – they were all people who helped us run our activities after their school, university or full-time jobs. We can hardly describe how happy we are that we can now employ more of these people. It helps us deliver more comprehensive and professional services to those who need them. The management of our organization strives to offer to our employees not only meaningful and rewarding work, but also a stable and dignified working conditions.

For a long time, our family helped the Roma community for free and fully at our own expense. This has put us through many tests, but our motivation and determination to create a peaceful and inclusive environment was genuine. Our work is not suitable for anyone

who needs to see immediate results and believes in instant solutions to complex problems. We know this is a long-term problem. Sometimes, it is important to slow down for a while and recharge our energy. We are constantly on a lookout for an opportunity to change things – whether on a personal level, or community level, or perhaps on a national level. In the meantime, we also need a break once in a while, both as a team, and as individuals. Because there are always too many people needing our help, almost always more than we can handle. Which is why we need to set priorities and keep track of how many hours we work each day so that we find a healthy balance between our work and personal lives. We have responsibility towards our organization, towards God, and most importantly, towards ourselves.



It is God and His wisdom that gives us guidance in difficult times and without Him, we would probably just keep going in circles, achieving nothing significant. .

The great advantage of our organization is a participation of our Roma colleagues who help us run the activities. They have first-hand experience with the environment and the problems that the community has to face. They continue to give us valuable insights and they are trusted by the local Romani community, which helps us approach even its most isolated members. Our organization has been employing the Roma people since 2015. They are involved not only in the practical tasks needed to keep our organization up and running (cleaning, maintenance, taking care of the garden...), but they also talk to the parents, accompany children to the venues of our activities, bring problems to our attention, point out families who need

help, tutor the children and do many other things.

At first, only those who liked working with children agreed to cooperate with us. They prepared regular weekly meetings, helped us organize bigger events or regular church services, and joined us on our trips and one-off events. Over time, we required more help in the organization, especially with the accounting, applying for grants, processing photos and videos, managing the website and social network accounts, helping with the maintenance and storage of our equipment... We may focus on social and educational activities, but our work is very diverse. We need the people who are enthusiastic, talkative and who have a dream and mission, but also the people who are quiet, but thorough, orderly and consistent and who help us keep things together. Whether individuals with an analytic mind, or practical down-to-



earth people, we are grateful for everyone. And we all have the same goal.

Capacity Building and Professional Training

The staff of our organization undergo regular training, both in the form of self-study and external and internal training sessions. Our team includes students and graduates from a diverse range of university disciplines: social work, education, economics and engineering. We continuously expand our professional knowledge by participating in various courses. The team members also exchange their knowledge and experience during internal training sessions. Other activities focusing on development of the team members include regular one-to-one methodological meetings with the organization's management, where employees have the opportunity to discuss anything that happened and set goals for the future. The members also give the management important feedback regarding the methods, facilities or communication, or any flaws therein. External group and individual supervision as well as team-building events are further useful tools that help us keep going. Our team needs to be able to handle not only standard situations, but also highly challenging and unexpected situations that arise due to the problematic background of the families we work with, and also often due to the personal contact with the families, during residential events etc.. It is the difficult moments that test our ability to overcome tiredness or disillusionment -



they challenge us to always remember why we do what we do.

The development of our methods and our team has been particularly effective due to the success of our project, “Capacity Building and Professionalisation of the pro-Roma organization Close Neighbour.” This project was funded through a Czech Employment Programme and by the European Social Fund. Since September 2023, we have been able to focus more on fundraising and presentation of our work, which are central to securing sustainable funding.

Cooperation with Sky High Live

The cooperation between Sky High Live and Close Neighbour, r. a., stands as a testament to the power of collaborative efforts in the European Economic Area (EEA). Our partnership goes beyond mere organisational alignment; it is a vibrant “ecosystem” powered by the spirit of volunteerism.



In booth organisations volunteers play a crucial role, acting as catalysts for change and bridges between diverse communities. Their work not only enhances the lives of individuals but also strengthens the bonds of friendship and understanding across borders.

The essence of volunteering

Being together with others is the heartbeat of a selfless act where individuals offer their time, skills, and energy for the greater good. Its significance stretches back through history, where communal living necessitated mutual aid and support.

Today, volunteering has evolved into a structured form of service, encompassing a wide range of activities from local community projects to international aid efforts. So, what if no one is volunteering?

“Volunteers do not necessarily have the time, but they have the heart.” — Elizabeth Andrew.

The essence of volunteering is beautifully encapsulated in Muhammad Ali's words, “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth.” This perspective highlights the inherent responsibility we must contribute to our communities and the world at large. People embody this principle, dedicating themselves to causes that extend far beyond their personal gain.

Historically, volunteering has played a pivotal role in societal development. From the establishment of the first hospitals and schools to the modern-day responses to global crises, volunteers have been at the forefront. Their contributions are not limited to

the tangible outcomes of their projects but also include the intangible benefits of fostering empathy, solidarity, and a sense of global citizenship. This sentiment echoes the selfless nature of volunteer work, emphasizing that the essence of volunteering hears lies not in the abundance of free time but in the willingness to help and the capacity to care for others. What is your roll?

Overcoming Challenges. Volunteers often encounter various challenges, including navigating cultural differences, managing time effectively, and sometimes dealing with limited resources. These challenges require volunteers to be adaptable, resourceful, and resilient. Overcoming this not only contributes to the success of their projects but also fosters personal growth and a deeper understanding of global interconnectedness.

The rewards of volunteering are extensive and varied. Beyond the immediate impact on the communities served, volunteers gain invaluable experiences that enrich their personal and professional lives. These include the development of new skills, enhanced cultural understanding, and the formation of lasting friendships. The sense of fulfilment and purpose derived from volunteer work underscores its value, highlighting how giving back to the community can lead to profound personal satisfaction and growth.

Revision for sensitivity and inspiration

The essence of volunteering transcends time and geography, encapsulating the best of human values: compassion, re-

silience, and community spirit. As we look to the future, the narratives of volunteers and the outcomes of their efforts continue to motivate a new generation towards action. Inspired by the belief that: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” We recognize the transformative power of individual actions in driving collective change.

Volunteering within the framework of EEA cooperation, showcased through the partnership between Sky High Live and Close Neighbour, r. a., offers a unique cross-cultural exchange and mutual growth. For us in Norway it stands as a testament to how united efforts in service, not only meet immediate needs but also forge pathways for a more connected and understanding world.

As we conclude this exploration into cooperation and volunteer work, let's embrace the call to action to partake in volunteerism. Whether it's engaging in local community projects for vulnerable groups or contributing to international cooperation initiatives, the opportunity to make a difference is vast. In dedicating our time, we gain immeasurably more — a sense of purpose, a feeling of community, and the profound joy of contributing to a better world for all.

SKY
HØLT
LIVE SCENE



Bits and pieces of life

"The animal with the long neck - is it a giraffe or a zebra?" A 9-year-old girl asked as we were visiting the ZOO in Dvůr Králové. We are confident that she got her answers during our summer camp in 2013, whether about animals or important matters in life. Our summer camp game was called "The Armour of God." The children played various theatre games, for which they collected various parts of the armour - the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Shield of Faith ...

"I'll get a stove..." Simona replied to my question, sadly. She wanted to get a laminator from her parents for Christmas, so that she could better prepare educational aids for the children she was tutoring. Well, her parents gave her a stove...

"We work for accommodation and food," we go to bed after midnight, we are up at seven in the morning, we are in a rush all day, we hardly find a moment for ourselves... We're not slaves on cotton plantations, we're leaders at a summer camp.

"Jesus is the love of my life..." When an adult Romani man sincerely gives such a testimony, when he not only says it, but also lives by it for several years, it always brings me to tears. I always feel humbled and insignificant when I see the miracles God can do... Our visit to Krašov castle encouraged us very much, we were once again assured that God is alive and has not stopped working miracles! Our meeting with pro-Romani organizations from the V4 countries was again encouraging, with many educated Romani people (businessmen, music and dance teachers, the mayor of the village of Šimonovce in Slovakia etc.) attending the event.



Johanka Bělohoubková

Co-worker and supporter

Age: 28

Career: Coordinator of project activities

I have been in contact with the Romani community since I was born, my mother has always been interested in Romani people and wherever we moved, we were in contact with Roma families. When we moved to Pilsen 17 years ago, my mother used some of her contacts from before, and we started visiting local Romani families, taking their children on trips or to the swimming pool. I was 10 years old then. But this lifestyle was nothing new to me.

“Although a person knows that he cannot help everyone and cannot completely change the lives of all children, the weight of individual problems still falls on him.”

I have long been impressed by the cheerful mood that prevails across the community. The children and parents are cheerful and, one could say, generally happy, despite enormous physical and mental exhaustion and challenging living conditions. This is a very inspiring attitude, especially in times when it's popular to complain about everything. I also like very

strong family ties and the way family members stand up for each other – this is certainly something we could learn from!

What I find most worthy of following about the whole project is the surprising selflessness on the part of my co-workers. They often come and ask what more they can do, how they can help, I see how the particular situations of children and entire families touch them deeply and how much they care. This is something we

should all learn! Unfortunately, this also has a flip side. When we maintain very intense and deep relationship with the community, we are constantly close to burnout. Although we know that we cannot help everyone, and improve the situation of everyone, it's hard not to be affected. We are constantly concerned about their life situations and we often



feel exhausted. That's why I would like to advise everyone, including myself, that sometimes you need to take a step back and not take everything too seriously.

There is a story that comes to mind most often when someone asks me about my experience. But I rarely tell it, because it's not very “representative”. We were taking the kids from the children's club back home. It was late afternoon, overcast and a little dark. We entered their house and climbed up the stairs to the 7th floor, cigarette butts on the stairs, laundry drying on the railing, broken doorknobs, dirt everywhere, empty bottles on the floor and the smell of urine everywhere. This is the home the children return

to every day. Suddenly, a dad of one of “our” kids walks from the other direction. His walk is unsteady, a syringe in his hand. The stairs are narrow. The children know what's going on. They simply keep walking past him. I try not to look too frightened in front of the children and walk on. Luckily, there was no incident. The children returned to their parents safely, and we also went home. I always think of this experience to remind myself what kind of environment these kids live in, what sorts of people they come in contact with. This is their “standard”, whether it be housing, number of relatives, substance abuse, financial background, etc.. It is completely different from what an average person can

imagine. It's always easier for me to understand what they need, why we are dedicated to them, what we are trying to save them from. It's a great motivation to keep going, but also a source of anxiety about what these little guys have to face.

Close Neighbour gave me a lot, but also took a lot from me. It has helped me to shape my values. It taught me to be grateful, humble, understanding and non-judgmental about the situation of other people. It helped me make many long-lasting friendships among my colleagues, but also some members of the community. But at the same time, my mother's passion, which I share to a large extent, took away a big part of my childhood. We spent most of our free time and finances working towards the good of the community, even when we were living on social benefits ourselves. I took it for granted at the time, but growing up and especially in retrospect, now that I'm a mom myself, I regret it on several levels and have to somehow process it within me. However, I still strongly believe in the work of organization, as it changes lives of these children. It is an amazing project.

Bits and pieces of life

"Pavla, have you ever noticed what a beautiful world the God created?" Well, I did, but I was really surprised when this question came from little Tony! Sometimes our work is so horrible it's hard to keep going. But sometimes, it is infinitely amazing! Either way, this job is a good fit for me, because my life has been a similar rollercoaster!

"Fire, fire!!!" The children shouted joyfully as they ran into the middle of the Romani Church service. We were demonstrating what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, but some of our props caught fire, which I did not expect. Pastor Emil, usually a very calm and understanding man, asked me not to do this again, as he waved away small puffs of smoke surrounding the scene. We are still cooperating with the Romani church community to this day and we are always happy to see each other!



"You will go to jail!" A six-year-old Mato told me when we were playing to have a phone call. He didn't even say hello. When I asked why, he replied that I had stolen something. Mato knew the business - various little things often ended up in his pocket. I started sobbing and I said I wouldn't be able to buy ice cream in jail, or bring Mato and his little sisters (he has five sisters) to church. That worked. Mato advised me to put the blame on my brother. I did not know what to do, so I took his advice. Mato assured me that I will not go to jail after all. On the same day, Mato found a box with musical instruments and started to play with them together with his sisters. I sang along. Mato suddenly said: "God likes it when we sing songs for Him." Anyone who has ever heard me sing will have to admit that Mato has great faith! My children laughed at me later at home, saying that the instruments and my singing went well together. Mato will soon have to choose his path. Will he follow in his father's footsteps (who was 25 years old but already several times in prison) or follow the voice in his heart telling him to listen to our Heavenly Father?

"Who's singing?" Romani songs are heard throughout the park in front of our premises. Since July 2015, the Roma Christian Church has been meeting in our organization. Their pastor, Milan, was an employee of our organization and participated in our activities, such as playing guitar with the children and teaching them to sing. Our Roma children know Milan, and some of them attend his church services. It is not easy to be religious in our society, which is rather atheistic and sceptical. And for our Roma children, this is doubly true.



Age: 29
Career: Project manager

Pavla Macháňová

Co-worker and supporter

As the eldest daughter of the founder, Pavla, I came into contact with the activities of Close Neighbour before the organization itself was founded. At first, we brought the children to the Sunday worship meetings for Roma people, and prepared a program for them: songs, craft activities, games and shorter speeches on various topics. Later we began to cooperate with the asylum house "Hope" and asylum house of St. Zdislava. Every week,

For me personally, the most important thing is knowing how meaningful the whole Close Neighbour project is. While it is often challenging, knowing that we can help change the lives and futures of children in need for the better – it is something that continually gives us new energy and motivation.

I always used to say, that my team are not the children, but the leaders. Even now, as part

"It's nice to see what a diverse team of people we have around us and how everyone contributes in their own way to the functioning of the organization."

we organized scout group meetings in those houses. We expanded these regular meetings gradually, and added first larger events: visits to the pet shelter, swimming pool, the aqua world, and trips to nature... Later on, we held events over the weekend and summer camps. The number of children attending our events grew day by day, as siblings, classmates, neighbours and other friends joined the original group.

of my job, I mainly take care of good working conditions and equipment for the staff, so that nothing stops them from fully devoting their time to the children and their families. I am glad that in recent years, we have enough time and space not only for the usual work for the Roma community, but also for our internal needs as a team: external and internal training sessions, experience sharing sessions, mentoring,

team building and other useful activities that we need to keep going.

Since the times of my studies, my most intense efforts in the organization have been the preparation and management of summer camps. As a program leader, I prepared workshops, team games, quizzes, bulletin board materials, and more. During the summer camps, I mainly made sure that the program ran as planned (or at least otherwise than planned), that everything needed was available on time, and everyone knew what was going to happen and what their job was. In this position, I have been able to use my natural aptitude for systematic planning, organizing and managing a team. With clipboards in hand and a whistle around my neck, I always liked to be in charge. But at the same time, the unpredictable situations and specific challenges of our summer camps taught me to be more flexible, collaborative and to communicate better.

After I started my maternity leave, we were able to launch larger projects that expanded my role from a summer camp supervisor to an almost permanent staff all year round. In my role as Project Manager, I am once again

dedicated to planning projects and implementing them in a systematic, timely and efficient manner. And I'm still learning to be more flexible, tolerant and kind. It's nice to see the diverse team of people that came together thanks to Close Neighbour, and how everyone contributes to the organization in their own way, whether it's by running a program with the kids, tutoring, bookkeeping, or working in the club garden.



Bits and pieces of life

"You have to watch out for yourself, nobody else will do it for you!"

I shouted at the kids as they were enjoying themselves at the St. Linhart Rope Centre near Carlsbad. This is where we took the children at the end of our summer camps. Everyone loves it, but they need to be reminded that despite all the security measures, they need to watch out for their own safety and double check everything. It is an important lesson about responsibility!

"Petr hasn't gotten a disciplinary note in two months!" Kaja got his first A in reading (he's in third grade), and Sara says she wants to work when she is older. She won't live off unemployment support! We are happy when our children make progress! There is still room for improvement of course, we still have many challenges ahead of us, but thank God for every step in the right direction!

"Phone tutoring?"

Due to the pandemic, we had to cancel many of our regular activities. We tried to switch to some available options, such as phone tutoring or tutoring via Facebook. Once again, we had to reconcile ourselves to the fact that the level of knowledge is very different for every child. Some kids do not know basic Czech grammar in the 4th grade. This is due to the fact that the Romani language is different and the children struggle to learn proper Czech. We are aware that these children need more time and practice to grasp certain concepts that the Czech kids normally handle with ease. Unfortunately, teachers at elementary schools are often unaware of these challenges. One of the things we try to do is meet with teachers and raise awareness about certain issues that the Roma children face. One of the team members even wrote an academic thesis on this topic while studying at the Faculty of Education. We intend to continue regularly sharing our observations and insights at various conferences, debates and meetings.

"Mono is worse!" That was the first hint during one of our games at the Volunteers Weekend. Some children needed the second hint, too ("It is not so dangerous outdoors!"), and the third one ("Monox is more dangerous!") or fourth hint ("It is a gas!"). After the last hint, everyone had already guessed. They knew that carbon monoxide is more poisonous than carbon dioxide. They're both produced by combustion or burning. Carbon monoxide is produced when fossil fuels burn without enough oxygen, and carbon dioxide is a part of our atmosphere. At the end of the game, everyone found their reward free coffee vouchers - which Costa Coffee gifted to us. We held our first Volunteers Weekend in 2016 and have been happy to repeat the event regularly since. During our summer camps, there is usually no time for any conversation beyond what needs to be done. This event gives all volunteers a space to talk and play a few games together. We browsed through photos and videos from the summer camps, talked about what could be improved, what went really well, or what went wrong. We were preparing for the next summer camp. We were accommodated at a weekend house, which might not have been a five-star hotel, but it was cozy and sufficient for our needs. At the same weekend, elections were taking place in our country, so we all went to throw in our vote. We are not indifferent to what happens in our country.



Marie Papazianová

Co-worker and supporter

Being a part of Close Neighbour has impacted my entire life. When I was four years old, my parents divorced. In 2007, my mother, siblings and I moved to Pilsen. From then on, my activities within the Roma community began. I have to say, I practically grew up surrounded

in the organized trips and events and gradually started organizing and managing them myself. I was a camp leader, cook, and even a program leader for several years. Last year, for the first time, I was leading our group within the DiscoverEU project,

“Motto: Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life!”

by the community. At first, we invited the Roma children to join various trips with us, mostly to the nature, or to a church service. We paid for everything out of our own pockets, which was unsustainable in the long run. For this reason, my mother founded the organization Close Neighbour in 2010.

I gradually learned new skills and gained experience, and along with that, I was able to expand my activities and engagement. My current role in the organization is a financial literacy and employment specialist. But initially, I was an assistant for the extra-curricular activities, then a leader. At first, I participated

which is a project that allows us to travel around Europe by train together with socially excluded young people. I set up an Insta-



gram profile for the organization and started promoting our activities not only on social media, but also at various seminars, meetings, conferences, at the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research, the Platform for Roma Inclusion and many other places. I promote our organization not only for the public, but also among my closest friends. Thanks to this, Adel, Eliska, Ondra, Maky and Filip, who are, without doubt, my close friends, started working for us.

My time spent at organisation had a great influence on my choice of the field of study, both in high school and later university. When choosing a high school, I felt the need to help my mother with accounting because I felt it was too overwhelming for her. So, I enrolled at the Business Academy in Pilsen to learn accounting and to be able to support her. Gradually I started helping her with accounting. After some time, however, I felt that this job is not a good fit for me, and I don't want to do it long-term. So, we found someone else to help out with accounting instead of me. My choice of university was influenced by many factors. For a long time, I didn't know what academic path I want to pursue. One day, at an event called

“Pilsen courtyards,” one lady helped me identify what I want to do. After I finished my presentation, she said that “it was evident that I study social work and wanted to be around people, because I was passionate about it.” I was quite surprised because at that time, I was in my fourth year at the Business Academy and had no idea where to go next. This lady helped me identify a field of study that might be the best fit for me, and indeed, I eventually chose social work as my field. I believe it was one of my best decisions in my life, because I feel I am in the right place, and I really enjoy studying most of the subjects.





Among the tireless and regular supporters are undoubtedly the Bochoř firefighters, who have been supplying drinking water for our summer camp over the last years. Their presence at the site is always very appreciated by participants of all ages.

7. OUR SUPPORTERS

I know it's a bit of an obsession, but I'm so busy and immersed in ministry to the Roma that I don't have time to maintain relationships outside of this context. So, when I think of my friends, I think of either sponsors or volunteers or moms of our Roma children.

“Money solves everything.”

This almost heretical statement is recorded in the Bible, in the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 10. But to me, it means that the concepts of the Bible, God, life, and truth must always be understood in their wider contexts. There are no simple solutions, no simple recipes for a good life, nothing is ever black and white. To me, the only “certain” truth, love and life is Jesus Christ.

Despite the controversy surrounding the statement “Money solves everything”, we cannot deny that money is indeed much needed in a variety of contexts, and can help

a variety of noble goals. A lot of amazing things can be achieved without money – just like our first 20 years of ministry to the Roma children. At the beginning, I was simply a girl from a poor family who liked to take Roma children to church services and trips. When I wanted to organize a summer camp, I asked the church community to collect some money on a voluntary basis, or I helped families to apply for a one-off benefit from the government. I was a stay-at-home mom for 16 years, raising five children of my own. Apart from summer camps, the best activity I could offer to the Roma children at that time was swimming pool. Because we often got a discount there. We are very grateful for the generosity provided to us back then!



At that time, I was watching out for opportunities that did not require entrance fees or tickets. For example, on the Children's Day, there was a one-off opportunity to get a free entrance to the Zoo if the children brought a picture they made at home. There were occasionally discounted entries to museums, free entry Science Days, and so on.

When my youngest daughter, Marie, wanted to explain to me how hard it was to play a certain tricky piece on her clarinet, she used the following comparison: “Mom, it's so hard, as if something were for free, and you couldn't take a single Romani child there.”

It would sound weird to say that I founded the organization “Close Neighbour” because of money. But it really was the main reason. After twenty years of trying to do everything without funding, paying everything out of the pocket, even I, the idealist, had to admit that it was no longer sustainable.

Establishing an organization gave me the opportunity to raise money from sponsors, and to expand our activities in ways we could not previously imagine. We now have suitable premises, several staff members, and can impact over 300 people each year across many families. We have worked with families extensively for over 10 years. Every year, we run



regular leisure activities and organize over 50 one-off events.

In retrospect, founding an organization was the only way to keep all of that going. And yet I did not like the idea for several years until 8 different people suggested that I do that, independently of each other and within a short time frame. Honza Libotovský and Katka Tůmová, who, together with me, became founding members of the organization Close Neighbour, were the most prominent supporters of the idea. I am very

grateful today that these people helped me make the right step back then.

My reluctance to establish a formal organization back then had a lot to do with my aversion to paperwork, rules, planning and formal structures in general. But the hardest part was overcoming the initial reluctance. Gradually I learned how to do my accounting, how to make a website, write grant applications... My wonderful children got involved in these unpopular activities as well. My oldest daughter, Pavla, learned how to shoot and edit videos and she manages our Facebook page.



She is also great at writing and managing large Norwegian or European projects. My other daughter, Johana, edits photos and helps with administration tasks. She has a degree in Education Studies and wrote her thesis on the education of socially disadvantaged children. The third daughter, Ester, prepares project days and workshops. She is a dentist and patiently works with extended families whose members have often been unable to find a dentist for decades and require urgent dental treatment. My youngest daughter, Marie, graduated from the Business Academy and has been helping with accounting for many years. She now studies Social Work and is expanding the skills, knowledge and connections that will be very valuable to us! My husband, my son and sons-in-law are helping with the maintenance, repair and construction works at the summer camp, they provide technical support and help with graphics. I will never be able to thank them enough for what they do!

Our sponsors

In the 13 years following the foundation of our organization, we have received several individual donations, as well as government and corporate grants. We feel deeply responsible for using the donated money for the intended purpose. People who made the first donations occupy a special place in our hearts. The first donation from the company Garris, the first big discount from Hannah, the first regular individual donor Tomáš Kuba or the first big sponsor Vojta Kraus. Once, at the beginning of 2016, I noticed that a large amount of money had landed on our bank account. We didn't know the donor, but we

knew he previously liked our Facebook page. My children told me: "Mom, don't contact him, he must have made a mistake and will want the money back." We really did not expect anything like this. Our professional self-esteem was quite low at that time. Since then, I sometimes have lunch with Vojta. He is one of those sponsors who not only sends money, but also takes an active interest in what is going on in the organization. I know that as a religious person, I should have a deep confidence that whatever I need, God will provide for me. But there always was the nag-



ging uncertainty that one day, I might have no money for food, the rent, that I would need to pay a fine because of an error in paperwork. This uncertainty was dispelled when we met Vojta. Vojta has supported us generously on a regular basis, yet he is a very modest person and has no desire to be on the front page of our book.

We decided to organize a summer camp with the theme “American Indians”, because I had a pair of Indian boots that I received from our Austrian Christian friends as a part of their regular clothing donations. And I wanted to use these boots somehow. We applied for a donation with the American Embassy in the Czech Republic. To build some mutual trust and friendship, my husband

and me visited the American Garden in Chudenice. They weren't pleased, in fact, they didn't care. Our second attempt to impress and build friendship was even worse. We thought that if we tell the Americans that we are going to talk about Native American people and culture at our summer camp, the Americans at the embassy will be excited that we are teaching Czech children about their history. But they were not happy about it, they were angry. The head of the cultural department, which was in charge of allocating the grants, was furious. He said that the history of Native Americans was genocide and America's greatest shame, and that he certainly wasn't going to support someone who wanted to teach others about it.



Fortunately, his subordinate, Megan King, had a different opinion. Megan fell irrationally in love with us before she even met us. She told her boss that if he does not support the summer camp, she is going to quit, because she loves our project and the idea of helping the Roma children is worthy of support. As a native American, Megan was familiar with the Scout organization, and our summer camps were similar to the Scout summer camps. Megan's boss eventually gave in and we received the funding we needed. It was a comfortable amount of money for us back then in 2015 and besides the necessary camp supplies, we were able to buy our first printer as well. Megan came to visit our sum-

mer camp personally, together with her family, and she has remained loyal to us and our summer events ever since. She comes to visit us and gives donations to us to this day. We were touched when she said: “I've worked in the non-profit sector all my life and I've never given a penny to anyone but you, Pavla!” When her mother turned 70, Megan gifted her a certificate of donation towards our next summer camp. Her mother must be an amazing person, because she loved it! That was a great honour for us. Megan is similarly passionate like me, and we are very close. Because of my rather hectic lifestyle, my friends are either volunteers, sponsors or mothers of our Roma children.



The less conventional ways

In addition to the conventional funding opportunities, such as grants, we sometimes use less conventional ways to raise money for our activities. For example, in 2012, I went with my children to see the potential venue of our summer camp near Konstantinovy Lázně. The police stopped me because my car lights were off. We had a nice chat, I didn't receive a ticket or penalty points. The police officers came to visit our summer camp and organized a demonstration for the children of the police work with dogs.

Another place, another time, I was hitchhiking on the highway, and pastor Sylvain Romain from Austria picked me up. Ever since

our ride, his church community in Austria has been sending us clothes for the Roma families. As we talked in the car, he kept asking how big vehicle we need to get the clothes over to us. "This car?" He pointed at a huge truck. "No, too big, this car!" I replied. My English skills are not exactly impressive, but I can get by.

In 2019, I got a call from the TV studio, saying they wanted to do some footage with us about the work of volunteers in our organization. We were at a summer camp with the kids and there was a lot of noise all around, so I did not hear what exactly they said. The filming was to be in the middle of the holiday season and coincided with a planned event for the kids. I thought we will show for a few seconds on a programme in a local TV, and I readily agreed to everything. A volunteer

called Tomas came with the crew and he was a great person. The filming took place over a few days. We ended up being part of a show called "Millionaire Among Us" and they aired about 20 minutes of us. This helped us get additional friends and sponsors. And the children were excited to be on TV!

One day, we were setting up the summer camp, and an owner of the company Seos rode by on a quad. We had a chat, and ever since, Jan, the owner, has had our backs whenever we had an emergency. When our car

breaks down, when we need a pump to inflate the ball for a soccer tournament on Sunday, he'll stop doing whatever he is doing and he will come and help us out – thank you very much!

I really enjoy these random and unconventional ways of getting support, as opposed to paperwork, but I have no control over them. I think of them as God-sent!



Bits and pieces of life

"I wonder... what are you doing with the kids?"

A strange-looking Hungarian man in an even stranger hostel asked me. This hostel where I picked up the kids was located between a train station, a factory and a morgue. A junkie tried to punch me there recently, and someone also stole my new bike. I tried to answer the question politely. "I take the kids out, to the ZOO, to the swimming pool, on trips, to church..." "That sounds great, I have children and grandchildren in Hungary and Romania." Then the Hungarian pulled out his wallet and gave me a banknote. This made me feel rather uncomfortable. But don't get me wrong. Extra money is always great, and if you want to support us with a small amount monthly, you are welcome to do so! It would be great help and encouragement for us.

"I was the best!!!"

Matthew won his age category at the Sports Afternoon and was immensely excited. He got a shiny trophy and a backpack. Small prizes and treats were given to all the children who participated. We try to join events that others organize, such as the Sports Afternoon called "Show What You Can Do!" organized by the Social Department of the City of Pilsen, or the Leisure Time Festival organized by Pilsen Children's Council or the beautiful performances of the Paprsek dance group, which some members of our team attended as dancers for many years.

"Pavla, I would never steal from you!" This confession by the 14-year-old boy made me feel honoured. Stealing was otherwise, well, a part of his life. Joining us really is meaningful!

"And we will buy toothbrushes and toothpaste for the children!" "Mommy's coming up with ideas again..." my children noted during one of our internal family meetings. My middle daughter Ester is a dentist and suggested we do a little oral hygiene campaign for the children. It seemed logical to me to also hand out toothbrushes and toothpaste on that occasion. A lot of my ideas are spontaneous and based on current situations and needs I happen to observe. Most of the grant applications are written six to twelve months in advance, which is why we are so grateful to our spontaneous or individual sponsors who support us regularly. They make it possible for our spontaneous plans to happen!

"I want a sleeping bag for my birthday!" This was Vojta's idea. Before his birthday celebration, he told his friends that he wants a sleeping bag for a summer camp, but he did not really want it for himself. In the restaurant where he was celebrating, many pieces of camping equipment were collected and donated to our organization. Thank you so much, everyone!

"And why don't they simply go to the post office?" My then six-year-old daughter asked me when I tried to explain to her why some people beg on the streets for money. I realized I need to work more on the financial literacy of my own children, and I was also encouraged to work on this important area of knowledge with the Roma children.



Age: 48
Career: Freelance Developer

František Veličkov

Co-worker and supporter

I met Pavla for the first time at the course “One Plus One” (evening sessions for married couples), which took place on 25 February 2016 under the guidance of Karel Řežábek in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pilsen. I was lucky enough to be seated at the table where Pavla and Aleš were tutors.

Karlovy Vary back home, I visited the venue of their summer camp. This is where I saw the this team in action and got an opportunity to help. This experience left a deep mark on me, and I decided to visit again after a few days. I saw how Pavla worked with the children. Most of the children did not

“This might be hard to believe, but some of these children saw certain flowers and animals for the first time - before the camp, they only heard about them at school.”

We started by introducing ourselves, and I received a business card with contact details of Close Neighbour. During one of the weekends in the Czech Ore Mountains, I got to know the attending members of the Christian community as we spent a lot of time hiking together. Pavla was telling us about the activities in her organization. One of their biggest events was the summer camp for children at the Slavkov Forest mountains.

During the summer holidays, as I was travelling from

know how to swim. Before the week was over, Pavla managed to help some of the kids stop being afraid of water, and teach them to swim in the nearby pond! This might be hard to believe, but some of these children saw certain flowers and animals for the first time - before the camp, they only heard about them at school. In her work, Pavla followed the principle of John Amos Comenius - School by Play, as well as Christian values.

Every camp had a specific theme. I remember Pavla

telling the kids that it's better to be the policeman than the criminal in life. This might have surprised some of the naughty boys, but also might have resonated with them and made them reconsider their own values. After experiencing the summer camp, I decided to donate to the organization and starting in July 2016, I have been their regular donor. When circumstances allow, I still sometimes attend their events. In 2018, I attended a Christmas party, where children were dancing and singing, and received presents, which made them very happy.

Pavla's work, as well as the work of her whole team, has been inspired by Christian values and can be unbelievably challenging. As for me, supporting them financially is the best investment I have ever made. I wish the organization to flourish and stay active for many years to come! I look forward to helping again with setting up or closing up the summer camp!



Bits and pieces of life

"They bought me a typewriter..."
replied a beautiful young Roma woman, the chairwoman of IQ Roma servis, r. a, when I congratulated her on winning the title of the Nonprofit of the Year 2013 and asked her how she managed to succeed in life. Coming from a poor family, she was unable to practice her typing at home while studying at the secondary school of economics and almost dropped out. And then she got a typewriter from a sponsor, she practised and passed her exams.

"We have a new room for our Children's club!" This was definitely the biggest news of 2019. It was great that we were able to start furnishing and refurbishing it right away thanks to individual donations and we didn't have to wait a year to see whether or not we would get grants for it. We received enough donations and grants to make the place cozy and beautiful - thank you so much and come visit us and see for yourselves!

"I want the piggy bank! I'm going to save up money for Close Neighbour!" Tomas, one of the participants of our summer camp, exclaimed when prizes were being handed out. He indeed knows how to make us smile! ☺

"They still have faith in us!" That's what I am thinking every time I see the list of regular donations. It's a huge encouragement for me. As well as, for example, the amount of Christmas presents for the children we get each year so we can give something to all children. The gifts and contributions from individual donors, foundations and the government are tangible proof that we are not the only ones who care. They are proof that our work is meaningful because when our children grow up, there will be many people in our society who will love them, will root for them and maybe even offer them jobs or rent them an apartment. We are infinitely grateful for every single one of you out there!

"I will support Close Neighbour!"
While on a trip, the boys were telling us what they want to buy when they grow up, get a job and become rich. The things they mentioned included a house, a car, trips with their children, and supporting Close Neighbour. We were very pleased and look forward to their support! Then we spent some time calculating how many years it would take before the kids get rich, and if I am retired by then... Of course, we reminded them that to achieve all this, they need to study well at school, and get a qualification of some sort. We genuinely hope that the boys will achieve their dreams!



Zuzana Jenčíková

Co-worker and supporter

Age: 34
Career: Customer
Service Team Leader

Personality portrait

I first learned about organisation Close Neighbour about 4 years ago when I was looking for a non-profit organization to support together with my colleagues. At that time, we approached several similar organizations, but Pavla responded the fastest, and so, she was our unofficial “winner.”

When she came to meet us for the first time, she immediately impressed me with her passion and enthusiasm. At the same time, what I liked about her is that she is very practical and honest, she says things as they are, not trying to “sugarcoat” it.

Like I already mentioned, I am very impressed by Pavla’s passion. I like the goal of Close Neighbour, which is to support children and their families, to educate them and set an example they can follow. They teach the children that their life, their fate is in their own hands. They can influence what their lives will be like, and how the rest of the society will perceive them.

I will never forget about the “Bear Walk” which we organized for the children from

the club, and for the children of our employees. Each participant took one or two children, and walked with them a prepared route, searching for pine cones. The event was a success, and we hope to organize something similar again.

For the last few years, we have been preparing presents for the Close Neighbour children as part of the “Christmas Shoebox” event, and every year since November, my colleagues have been asking if this event will take place again. It always makes me happy to see how many people remember Close Neighbour.



Karel Řežábek

Co-worker and supporter

The first meeting with Pavla I can remember took place in 1992, the same year I started working as a pastor in Pilsen. We met at a student apartment, and I still remember how passionately she talked about Roma children and what she wanted to do for them.

I have been following the work of Close Neighbour basically since the beginning. I am deeply inspired by Pavla’s vision to help Roma children simply “be children,” so that they can grow up to be better adults. The children she was once involved with in the early days have now become adults. They have children of their own and are encouraging them to again partici-

pate in the activities run by Close Neighbour (and these children will probably continue the tradition).

Pavla has a strong personality, and she can achieve great things (and has achieved many great things already), but sometimes, the cooperation was challenging. However, I have had the same experience with many other strong personalities, and I have no doubt that many have had the same experience with me! At the same time, I appreciate that Pavla has the ability to develop her personality and use her talents in a mature and healthy way. I respect her a lot!



Age: 57
Career: Pastor,
lecturer, personal
and relationship coach

Personality portrait



8. INSPIRING OTHERS

... In order for us, as Czech and Romani people, to live
... in harmony, both sides need to change their mind-
... set. That is why we are trying to work with both
... sides.

Example for others

It is always a very pleasant surprise when someone calls or writes to say they like or appreciate what we are doing. We often feel insignificant and invisible. So, it feels awesome to get positive feedback, or to be asked to share our experience with someone else. This gives us hope, because the issues we are trying to solve are bigger than us, and unless new people choose to join us, we cannot do much. In order for us, as Czech and Romani people, to live in harmony, both sides need

to change their mindset. That is why we are trying to work with both sides. Our activities try not only to help the Romani community to be more active, but also to promote tolerance, understanding and friendliness on the part of the Czech society. To achieve this, we regularly present the positive aspects of the Romani culture. We share our experiences at conferences at both national and international levels. We regularly participate in festivals in Pilsen where we present our work. We actively initiate meetings and discussions with the city council and regional representatives.



A good introduction of our activities and our target group is essential especially when we participate in cultural or sporting events. This is our strategy that aims to improve mutual relations between the majority and the Roma minority. We often face prejudice, misunderstanding and judgement on both sides. The prejudice is the result of bad experience people made with each other in the past, and it is one of the greatest obstacles to harmonious relationships. We try to counter this by creating new, positive experiences between the two communities.

We met the Scouts in Pilsen when the Gemini Summer School came to visit us for

three consecutive years, in 2017-2019. These were always extremely nice and enriching meetings. We exchanged experience and looked for ways in which these young Scout leaders could involve children from their local Roma communities in their activities. Of course, we did not only talk, but visited our local Roma community as well. The Scouts prepared games and trips for the children, and we went to the swimming pool, the ZOO and the Techmania Science Center. The Scouts learned that Roma children are mainly just children, and that if they understand some of specific aspects of their personalities, and follow certain rules when working with them, it will bring joy to everyone involved.



We were also able to share our experience with young people from the Czech Republic and Slovakia at the Summer Congress of Christian Youth, where we presented the work of our organization. We also had the opportunity to explain what is needed for peaceful multicultural coexistence at the University of West Bohemia, and we offered the university students an opportunity to help as volunteers. No students signed up as volun-

teers, but we were still grateful for the opportunity to talk to them about what we do.

Another thing we organized were interactive talks for elementary school children about multiple cultures living next to each other, about prejudice and social disadvantage. During the talks, we demonstrated how easy it is to misjudge a person based on looks. Children are great dialogue partners and great

listeners. Their anonymous feedback is often very cute. They promise they will donate to us in the future, they tell us that our program was fun, and that they are glad someone is helping the children in need. They encourage us to keep going!

Sometimes, we serve as an inspiration for others without planning it. One day, we were using a public transport, and I was ex-

plaining to the children that we need to buy a ticket, otherwise we might get fined. And if we do not pay the fine in time, we might get into some real trouble. That living in debt is not dignified because then you can't even have your own bank account... At the next stop, a young man who wasn't a part of our group turned around between the doors and said to me: "You convinced me, I'm going to buy a ticket."





Eva Ištuková

Co-worker and supporter

I first came across the organization in 2018 during a “Neighbour’s Day” event at John Hus Square in Pilsen. I noticed from my window that there was an event for kids going on outside, so I went down to check it out and got involved right away. The kids were going from activity point to activity point and had so much fun with activities like face painting. When I found out they offered free tutoring and clubs, I immediately agreed to have my kids join. I was overjoyed that my children had a chance to learn and participate in activities because, with my financial situation, I could never have afforded paid

clubs. I’m so grateful to Close Neighbour for making this possible. Every time my kids came home, they were excited to tell me what they’d done and what they’d enjoyed most. Their positive energy lifted our whole household for the rest of the evening. That’s why I said yes when they wanted to continue attending. At first, my four oldest kids attended, and now, all seven of them are regular participants.

Over the past six years, my kids haven’t just been going to tutoring sessions and hobby-based activities, they’ve also been on outdoor trips, zoo visits, and other outings.



As a reward for their participation in tutoring, they’ve enjoyed activities like laser tag, the Jump Arena, go-karting, and theater performances. But the highlight for them is the summer camp, which they’ve attended five times. During the warm summer days, we’ve gone swimming together. They’ve also taken part in non-residential summer camps, with trips to places like a goat farm and the aquapark in Beroun. A truly special experience for us was a family trip to Šumava, where we stayed in a large cabin. At first, we didn’t know what to expect, but we were thrilled to spend time together as a family. It was an unforgettable experience we could never have afforded on our own. The kids were amazed by the beautiful house and the huge bathroom with a bathtub – they loved it! We enjoyed our time together and felt so at ease, like we were



part of a family. My favourite moment was our hike to Black Lake. It was 8 km away, but the view made every step worth the effort!

Three years ago, we moved from Pilsen to Hradec near Stod. We were afraid this would mean losing contact with the organization, but they didn’t abandon us. They regularly come to visit us in Hradec. My kids have grown especially close to their leaders, Maruška and Johanka. They’ve built a bond of trust that’s still strong today. Whenever they couldn’t visit us, the kids would be heartbroken and even cry.

I’m so thankful my family got to know your organization. Without you, we never would have had these amazing experiences. I’m happy to be part of this and wholeheartedly recommend your events to other families!



Bits and pieces of life

"You can try this in your hometown as well!" This was probably the most important message from us to the Scouts. You have tried it, and you handled it well. You can always turn to us for advice or guidance. Accept a Roma child to your group as well. You can impact their life significantly!

"When are the Scouts coming? When's Neighbourhood Day again? When is the next summer camp?" We strive for long-term relationships with our kids, we've known some of them literally since they were born. Every kind response from the Czech majority population is crucial for us, because it shows to the children that it is indeed worth the effort to try to play by the rules and to integrate into society. Long-term cooperation and regular kind interaction with the majority population are even more valuable. E.g. repeated visits of the Scouts in the summer, repeated events with the Christian dance group Paprsek, repeated visits to the ZOO, Techmania Science Centre, the swimming pool, repeated festivals... We really appreciate every bit of help and we believe that our children will start to connect the dots when time comes.

"We've never gotten so much support anywhere else!" told us a Scout leader who organized trainings for future Scout leaders. We were honoured to be invited to their activities and we had an opportunity to tell more than thirty young people about our work. They, in turn, had an opportunity to work with our children and see what it entails. The Scouts spent three days with our children! Thank you very much!

"Will there be cars in heaven?" I will definitely fly! But I would like to have hands too, not just wings, because I like to make things! There must be cars in heaven, otherwise Fanda wouldn't like it there... This profound conversation was not led by our Roma children, but by adults (pillars of the church) from the Christian Community of Pilsen, which is our loyal sponsor. It never hurts to remain a child for a little while...



Age: 22
Field of study: Student of
Teaching for Elementary
Education, University of
West Bohemia in Pilsen

Personality portrait

Adéla Spěváčková

Co-worker and supporter

In the past, I was considering a career path in finance, where success is measured by bank account balances and career progression. My ambitions were towards entrepreneurship and financial stability. However, everything changed when one of my classmates introduced me to a world that was far away from my original ideas.

The non-profit organization run by her mother opened my eyes not only to other possibilities, but it also showed me how rewarding it can be to work towards helping others. Laughing children, their smiles and their innocence, made me see the world in a new light. Although my new dreams were



met with misunderstanding and resistance from my family, who were concerned about my future prospects, my heart was set on following my newly discovered path.

I am not living aligned with the desires of my heart, and I know what I do is meaningful and rewarding. Despite all doubts and concerns, my heart remains deeply connected to this path. When I see how the children develop under our care, I am feeling happy, and I know I am where I should be! My life may have diverged from my original plans, but it is now filled with love, purpose and children I have come to love as my own.



Jakub Planer

Co-worker and supporter

My first contact with Close Neighbour was in the summer of 2017. I was then completing my scouting education at the Gemini Forest School, where we prepared a three-day program for children from an excluded area living in Pilsen. Close Neighbour was the organizer. This is when I learned that Close Neighbour takes care of the children on a regular basis, whether it is summer camps or various free-time activities throughout the year. I was intrigued, and in June of the next year, I wrote an email to Pavla, asking if they need a hand for their next summer camp. We exchanged a few short emails and all was set. I arrived as an assistant, prepared a workshop and a few other activities. The summer



camp took place near Karlovy Vary, and also near an interesting rocking stone, well-known to all camp attendees. Next year, I arrived again. This time, I stayed for the full duration of the camp and took on more responsibilities.

The best memories? It was the moments that may seem quite ordinary and dull to most, ...playing soccer outdoors, Morse code workshop, sleeping outside along with the older boys, laser activities (the children will know), morning prayers, swimming in the pond. What made it especially rare and extraordinary for me was the people I had the chance to cooperate with – my friends from Close Neighbour, who made all this possible for the children, who would have normally not had the opportunity to enjoy many of these activities. It was exciting to be part of the adventurous (and maybe even a bit crazy) mission of Close Neighbour.



Age: 31
Career: Scientist

Personality portrait

Bits and pieces of life

"I am no actor!"

The plumber exclaimed as he was installing a new sink in our home. He was really tall, so I suggested casually that he could act as Goliath in our theatre event for children. Any opportunity is good to spread the word about what we do, and to offer volunteering opportunities.

Still, many people resist even the most tempting offers!

"Lenka and Kristyna dance with the Paprsek group!"

Pavla, our volunteer, is also the instructor of the Paprsek dance group for the youngest dancers. She regularly brings Lenka and Kristyna to their dancing sessions, buys them workout clothes and sweatpants, and generally takes a great care of them so that they fit in with the "white" girls. Our organization pays their course fees, using donations from individual sponsors. When children are 3-5 years, skin colour does not bother them. Some of the little dancers were curious about why our girls were so "brown", but no one ever had a problem with it. It's great when the first experience with people of other skin colour is positive! We keep our fingers crossed that all the dancers will continue to have a good experience with each other in the future.

"We're going to see the mayor!" For several months, we were been looking forward to this major event! Mr. Mayor received us in one of the city council meeting rooms! We carefully prepared for the meeting, thinking about what we will thank for, what we will ask for. We talked about how a mayor is elected by citizens. We talked about things we need to work on so that we can also become candidates for the mayor when we are 18 years old. About 40 children were involved in the preparations and we had a great time!



9.

CULTURAL AND OTHER SPECIFICITIES

I've been working with Roma communities for more than 30 years and there are still things that surprise me even after all those years. And that's exactly what I love about the job. I'm never bored, I can never be confident that I understand everything...

The Romani People and the Others

I always wanted to be a missionary. I dreamed about going abroad, getting to know other countries and other cultures. For example, I was inspired by Bruchko, a book about a 19-year old American, Bruce Olsen, who decided to leave his home and move to the rainforest in Colombia, bringing Christianity to the Motilone tribe. Although I had children soon after I got married, I never quite gave up on the idea of becoming a missionary. I speak Russian, which surprises even me, given my lack of talent for language learning.

In 2000, I took my family and a few other Christians and we spent a month at a summer camp just outside St. Petersburg. We prepared activities for children about Jesus in Russian. In 2001, my family and I spent five months in Kolomyja, Ukraine, where we ministered in a local Pentecostal church. I was leading the Sunday Bible studies for other leaders – trying to teach them how to make the studies more about “Sunday” and less about “studies”. I worked with women, young people, and families. I really enjoyed it!

After I came back from Ukraine, my family and I got involved in church planting efforts in Humpolec. As a mother of five preschool kids, I didn't have much energy left for anything else than my family. Once a week,

I attended the local maternity centre and prepared Christian-themed activities for children and other mothers, who became my friends. Several of them started believing in God.

Even after my divorce from my first husband, I still wanted to travel as a Christian missionary, but the five little children made it all too difficult.

The Romani people, for me, are an opportunity to be a missionary without leaving the comfort of my home, without dragging my

kids along, making them change schools, and without the necessity to learn foreign languages. The Romani language is beautiful, I know a few words and songs, but I can't speak it. The Romani people are amazing, but their culture is not easy to grasp and understand. At least, they don't wage any wars! I've fallen in love with the Romani people, so I'm happy that my dream of becoming a missionary has, in a way, come true :-).

I've been working with Roma communities for more than 30 years and there are still



things that surprise me even after all those years. And that's exactly what I love about the job. I'm never bored, I can never be confident that I understand everything...

Summer camps are a good example that illustrates how working with Roma children is different from working with children from the Czech families. Before the regular Czech summer camps, such as Pathfinder or Kvitek, the organizers know the list of participants as soon as January or February and they can already assign the children to teams. Before our "Romani" summer camps, we do not know until the last moment who shows up. Usually, the leaders have to wait

until all children are on the bus before they start dividing them into teams. The beginnings were wild and disorganized. We once had 34 children who signed-up, 16 of them already paid the symbolic fee of 100 CZK (around 4 EUR) and only 8 of them showed up in the end. But over the years, the situation has been improving. The difference between the children who sign up and those who actually show up is significantly lower, and we also have better camping equipment available. In the early days, I had to pick up the kids at their homes, and had to pack things for them. Before the first summer camp in 1992, I announced the meeting time 3 hours before our train was leaving. Nobody showed up, so

I went to the children's homes to find out what happened. At the first house, I rang the doorbell, and I heard the voice of the excited David and Rudla: "Pavla is here, we're going to the summer camp!" The boys were sitting at the table, with a loaf of bread in front of them. Both ends of the loaf were cut off, and each of the boys had their "share" of food carefully packed in their bags. Their mother was beautiful and she had 6 kids already. In order to pack some more things for the summer camp, we had to go out to the yard, and the boys showed me which drying clothes on the clothesline was theirs. I still don't know if I packed only the boy's clothes, or some

clothes of the neighbours too. The boys' mother was asleep the whole time and just before we left, I went to her and received a sleepy nod, acknowledging our departure. I had talked to her about the event several times before, she had filled out the registration forms, but she probably did not believe that I was being serious... In a similar way, I managed to collect about ten kids. When our train left Pilsen, some of the kids were glued to the windows and kept saying, "It's so beautiful here!" They never left Pilsen before.

In the recent years, we meet with the children 20 minutes before the scheduled de-



parture, with their parents coming to see them off and carrying heavy bags with all the things they need. The kids have made a several of little discoveries over the years - they found out that nights can be cold in the summer. They've also discovered that it can start raining during the week, even though it is sunny on the first day. They found out that a plastic cup is more suitable for camping than mugs made of breakable materials. They have made many other discoveries.

When working with people from other cultures, it is important to learn to distinguish between the behaviours that form a part of their untouchable cultural heritage, and the behaviours and habits that need to be changed or suppressed. It's always much easier to see the flaws in other people's lives and cultures than to look in the mirror and see our own. I'm looking forward to the time when we, Czechs, overcome our pride and let the Romani people point out our own flaws and shortcomings. They definitely have a lot to say to us, whenever we are ready to listen...



"I bought syphilis at Domazlicka Street for 250 CZK," one of our children's relatives told us. He was 18 years old and was infertile. It did not seem to bother him too much, as he already had a couple of children. When I asked him if his mother warned him about prostitutes, he said she didn't. As she herself worked in the field, she did not care about what her son did... It's been almost 20 years now. Today, syphilis costs considerably more on the market... I've been around socially excluded people for over half my life, yet I still never cease to wonder. It is not in my power to take all the kids to the swimming pools, to the summer camps, and to teach them about the pitfalls of life that still await them.

Bits and pieces of life

"Will you teach me to swim too?" We are very happy that we managed to beat one of the stereotypes that Roma people cannot swim. The younger children see their older siblings and friends swimming and they trust us that they we will teach them how to swim too. Our greatest battles are that with our own minds. Our motto when teaching kids how to swim is: "Water is a friend, water can carry you!"

"This is where my mother comes for methadone," eight-year-old Peter remarked, pointing towards the hospital. "Why?" I asked, not knowing what the word meant. "She used to do nasty things, but now she cooks for us," the boy explains, and it dawns on me that he was talking about the medication used to help addicts stop taking drugs. I had noticed that Peter was no longer in the care of his grandmother, but his mother was taking care of him, but I did not know the details. I talked to Peter about it to find out if he had forgiven his mother, and encouraged him to pray for her. Peter is good at maths, and in the second grade, he surprised his teacher by mastering multiplication and division. Fingers crossed for the whole family, and we hope the mom will continue cooking lunches for her kids and be OK.

"Not in the bin, Tom!" Petr and Jane shouted towards Tom, who was about to poop into the trash can. The toilet was in the hallway and it was locked, and the poor four-year old did not know how to deal with the situation. When we come out from the dark into the light, we may often find out that we are dirty. It is easy to get ourselves dirty when we can't see. There are more ways how we react to that discovery. The two extreme reactions are: try to wash ourselves, or try to break the light. Deciding what to do and how to react to various situations is always tough. Regardless of age, ethnicity and social status...



"What didn't the recruiter know?" The old lady, Tišerová, and her husband left their settlement in Slovakia after World War II and moved to Pilsen, following an invitation by recruiter at Škoda company. I have had the privilege of knowing this extraordinary woman for more than 20 years. I personally know all eight of her children, thirty grandchildren (sixteen of whom I have worked with), twenty-eight great-grandchildren (twenty-two of whom I have worked with), and nine great-great-grandchildren. I believe that our cooperation with this family will not end any time soon.

"Do you know why gypsies cry when the Titanic sinks? Well, because of the iron chain..." Usually we don't like any racist jokes, but it was a Romani boy that told us this one during one of our summer camps. Everybody laughed. Only a civilized and refined nation is able to make fun of itself...

"I was at Fat Granny's!" Denis announced. "Fat Granny" is not a pub or an underground culture event, it is how the boy refers to his favourite grandmother. This expression was not meant to be offensive, it is simply what the boy considered the most "fitting" term. The same words sometimes have slightly different meanings in different families, or different cultures. For example, when my kids were little, we agreed that we were not allowed to use offensive words at home, and should use milder alternatives like "baboon", instead. Of course, the kids are creative and they found a way to make these alternatives sound more offensive than I intended...

"You don't have to lose weight, you're old!" Sara told me, trying to comfort me. We talked about why it can be good to lose weight, why we shouldn't smoke, why not to let babies "cry it out", why not to sleep with a boyfriend on a first date... But we also played fun games, went on trips, watched movies and talked about all sorts of things. We had a great time.

"Eat as much as you can!" One of the father instructed his kids as he was handing them over to us before a trip. I previously informed the parents that I will provide snacks for the children. On the day before, this father asked me for money claiming they did not have enough money to feed the children. The reasons why parents let their children participate in our activities are diverse. But whatever these reasons are, we are glad they trust us with their kids!



Age: 39

Career: Healthcare
Mediator at the Czech
State Institute of Health

Natálie Schertlerová

Co-worker and supporter

I first met Pavla in 1992. I was a little girl and Pavla offered to take me to the church. At that time, the organization Close Neighbour did not exist yet. Pavla took us on trips and to church. In 2015, I started working at Close Neighbour as a volunteer.

“Pavla's like my second mom that I can tell just everything. Thank you so much!”

What I enjoy most about working at Close Neighbour is being in contact with children. I have 3 children myself and I know very well how important it is to spend time with them. For Roma children, this is even more important!



The strongest experience is from summer camps, which are often very challenging. I remember visiting a children's rope centre. There was a cable slide that I was incredibly scared to jump off. Pavla persuaded me to jump for about 5 minutes. In the end I overcame my fear.

I am very grateful to Pavla for reaching out to me back then. I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for her. Thanks to her, I have a job, I met many nice people, and my oldest son got into high school. She has been a huge support for me! She's like my second mom that I can tell just everything. Thank you so much!



Igor Bandy

Co-worker and supporter

I first came across Close Neighbour when my girlfriend Natalie Schertlerová started working there.

What I like most about Close Neighbour is that they help children and their families. I wouldn't change a single thing. Everything they do, they do very well. Hats off to all the staff and volunteers!

The most memorable moments come from the summer camps. I like how everyone works together. That's some-



thing I find extremely powerful! Overall, I have experienced many wonderful things with the organization. For example, last year I went on a trip to ZOO with my whole family to Dvůr Králové. I am grateful to be able to spend quality time with my family in this way.

I would like to thank the whole team for the trips, cooperation and free-time clubs for my children. Especially for all the support for my whole family.



Age: 37

Career: Worker

Bits and pieces of life

"I swear on Kevin's death I'll jump!" And jump he did. It was October and it was pretty cold. Adrian, his sister and his cousin love Kevin (their dearly loved nephew), and a bet is a bet! Out of the five kids who were with me on the trip, three came back home completely soaked with water and one of the "dry" kids got a nosebleed as soon as we got out of the car. Surprisingly, everybody survived. I was happy that I had taught the kids how to swim before. Nikola (from the family of non-swimmers) swam across the entire pond with me this summer, which made me very proud.

"Pavla, are you shiing or pissing?"** The boys asked me while exploring the creek. The creek runs near our outdoor toilet and the boys wanted to know what I am doing. When I asked them to reformulate the question in a nicer way, they didn't understand what was wrong with their original wording. So, the boys learned two new words during our summer camp: "to pee" and "to poop".

"Out of twenty-five Roma children, only one of them had a sleeping bag. Three of them only had the clothes they came in, two of the girls came in flip-flops." Of course, we were expecting this. We made sure to have enough sleeping bags, sleeping mats, spoons, raincoats, boots, torches and spare clothes ready at the summer camp. It is always a little miracle when we not only survive the summer camp, but when we also enjoy it. The biggest reward for us was that the children did not want to go home and booked their place for the next year!

"18 years old, two kids, renting a 1-bedroom flat together with his girlfriend and her five relatives with no income." This is not a fictional horror story, but the reality of a pretty cool guy we happen to know. At times, he is cheerfully playing hide-and-seek with the kids, but most of the time, he is distant and dejected. I wish I had any advice for him! Some of the things we do during our residential events with families is listening to their stories, showing we care, not trying to offer any quick fixes, but trying to find ways to at least slightly improve the situation, and pray together.

"We want a flush toilet!" That was about the only complaint the kids had about our summer camp. The food was great! The games were great! The night game was awesome! And the people were the best thing here! We will come again!

"Look, a duck! Let's go find some rocks!" It's been a really long time since we heard that line and had to explain again how to treat animals. We were really happy when we heard the kids saying things like: "Come pee with me, there'll be fireflies. The spider is a friend, you don't have to be afraid of it! I picked a flower for you!"

"Lance, Vinnetou, Indian, Paw..." These are not the nicknames of the children in our summer camp, but the actual nicknames of their adult relatives. Everyone knows them by these nicknames. These nicknames are often inherited, like surnames. They help navigate in the Roma community, and tell who is who. It would be nearly impossible without knowing the nicknames. This is one of the cultural differences we face every day. If you do not know these differences and do not respect their habits, you are not welcome. Our favourite Romani word is "Swachi". It expresses the kinship and the relationship between the husband's parents and the wife's parents. We don't have a word for this relationship in Czech - we don't need it - what a pity!

"My hair is neat and combed again!" I don't usually pay much attention to my appearance. But if I have to use a flea comb to protect my head against unwanted inhabitants, my hair is constantly neat and combed. There's always hazard in every job. If you work in a Zoo, you risk being spat on by a camel. If you work with children, you need a flea comb.

"Cooking healthy foods, canis therapy with Dorca the dog, art workshops..." In addition to the regular activities in our Children's club, we try to provide a variety of other interesting activities. Our aim is to keep children entertained and provide opportunities for them to grow and learn something new. Time with children is always precious to us, we never know when we see this or that child for the last time. Some families occasionally move to England, to Germany, to Slovakia, to another city, but even moving to another neighbourhood in Pilsen often means that we never see each other again...



Julie Hlaváčová

Co-worker and supporter

I first met Pavla about 15 years ago when she took my children to church. My relatives knew her. As we got to know each other personally, my own children started attending their events. I joined some of their trips and events as a volunteer volunteered, and then my husband started working at the organization. Pavla saw that I enjoyed the work, that I could be counted on, and so I was offered the opportunity to work here as well.

I was delighted to see that we make progress in our personal lives, and that working with families really makes



a difference. Some families that looked like they will never change, begin changing. We have a great team, and you can see that the work truly brings fruits!

I would like to share a personal experience: I was going through a rough patch, and the whole team supported me. We were all going to work, but I never felt alone. The team was constantly around and supported me whenever I needed it.

Thank you for all your support and for giving me strength to go on!



Jan Tišer

Co-worker and supporter

I met Pavla about fifteen years ago when my children were attending activities run by Close Neighbour. It was my partner who introduced us. The first job I did for Close Neighbour was to redo the entire garden – leveling the ground, digging a hole for a sandbox, building a fence, compost bins, etc.. In 2019, I started to work there as a football instructor. I gradually worked my way up and became the children's club manager and supervisor of the Physical activities (darts, table tennis, etc.).

I like working with children, I have many children myself. There's an excellent team and boss at Close Neighbour. The kids who come here would never be able to go elsewhere for activities and tutoring.



The fact that the organization provides this free of charge and also provides the children with what they need, is very appealing to me. Over the years that I have worked here, Pavla has helped a lot of families change their lifestyle and taught them how to cope with various challenges that they might not have been able to tackle without help. You can see that the children make progress as well.

All of my children come to organization and we see how the organization helps them grow. The tutoring helps them improve their results at school and makes them better prepared for the life ahead. Not just my family, but many other families benefit from this. One story that comes to mind is about one of the families. The dad was a heavy drinker, and the kids grew up with almost no parenting. After meeting with the team, the dad stopped drinking so much, got himself a job, and you can see a lot of progress in the children as well.

I still enjoy my work and am very happy for the opportunity to work here. I hope that our collaboration will last for many years to come.



Age: 59

Career: Maintainer

Bits and pieces of life

"Mom, buy some salt, we have only 3 kilos left" My 16-year-old daughter shouted at me as I was leaving to the grocery store. I have five children. Large families have their own peculiarities, regardless of ethnicity. Although my family is Czech and we live in the Czech Republic, we sometimes seem a bit exotic to some. When the children were smaller and I went for a walk with them, people thought we were a kindergarten. The fact that my family was often considered non-standard helped me understand other non-standard families. Generally, I do not expect and assume anything, but genuinely try to get to know other people. I think about others as people first, rather than some strange apparitions.

"Smoking isn't cool anymore!" I was delighted to hear that from one of the Romani fathers. His life is not entirely neat. He has more children than teeth. His current girlfriend is younger than his eldest son. His ways of earning money have been diverse, but we appreciate his interest in finding an honest work nowadays. He used this line about smoking when he saw his 13-year-old son smoking a cigarette. His son had been struggling with an addiction to smoking for a couple of years already. The father was unable to come up with any better argument against smoking, but we will help him find some more!

"You better bugger off from here!" A young man, not Romani, but white Czech, was trying to send me away to safety with these words, while we were trying to help him push his car up an icy hill. He didn't mean to offend me at all, he was just worried about me because the car was sitting on ice and it could slide in any direction. Incidents like this help me to be more tolerant to our children's vocabulary. We try to teach kids better manners, of course, and we are happy when the kids reprimand each other or apologize for something rude they said :-).

"Pavla, if the boys drown, I will drown you too!" One of the fathers said before we parted. The good news is that no one (got) drowned :-).

"Do you need a car radio by any chance?" A suspicious-looking gentleman on the street asked me in a half-whisper. Actually, I don't blame him for mistaking me for someone else. I parked my car in Husova Street in Pilsen, which is known for its gambling houses, nightclubs, and pawnshops. Three older, bigger and tattooed Romani men were loading something into my car. To the locals, I looked like a promising customer. I declined the offer, not even trying to explain that I am just moving a freezer and a bed for a couple of Romani children. Their brave grandma and grandpa are taking care of their 8 grandchildren because their parents are not doing such a great job at parenting. The one-bedroom apartment where they were previously staying was really too small for them, so I'm glad they were able to move to a bigger one...

"Don't worry about it!" Michaela, 13, said to me when I asked her about something I just witnessed. Her mother instructed her to go shoplifting, but Michaela got caught. Her mother beat her up and cursed her, so that the social workers in the shelter where they were staying thought she had nothing to do with the shoplifting accident. In the summer, Michaela went with us to a Camporee and she fit in so well with my own children that from the outside, you couldn't even tell that this girl was not my own. A different environment, a visit to "another world", a confrontation with different values - that's what we want to offer to these children.

"You're so fat! Here on your tummy," our Roma girls sometimes say to us. Roma children stay honest with others much longer than other children, sometimes for their whole lives. And we love them for it!

"I don't have a suit!" "You can go to church even in sweatpants," I assured the father of our children when he made excuses why he couldn't go to church on Sundays. Most Romani people claim to believe in God, but most of them don't want to change their lives or go to church.

"Pavla, I need something!" I was about to blurt out my usual answer "I won't give you any money", but before I had a chance to do so, the girl continued. "I need you to forgive me, because I did something bad." "Oh. This is not about money?" I was just making sure I understood her correctly. "I don't want money, I need forgiveness!" the girl insisted. God is indeed great. Greater than I can ever imagine. I keep reassuring everyone that for God, there are no hopeless cases. As long as one lives, there is hope! I am always surprised when I witness how true that is :-)!

Pavla Fáberová

The Life Story of the Founder

I was born on 1st January 1968 in Prague in an academic family. My grandfather Eduard Knobloch, M.Sc., D.Sc., was a typical scientist. He loved researching and exploring new things and didn't worry too much about how much it earns. In the 1950's, he discovered a way to simplify the production of insulin, but he didn't get any money or rewards because inventions were considered a part of his job responsibilities. If he discovered the same thing a few miles further west, we, his grandchildren, still would have lived off the fruits of his career.

My father, Pavel Knobloch, M.Sc., Ph.D, always had a passion for sports and sports events. He was an excellent soft-



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ball player and later, an important representative and organizer at the club level, the national level as well as the European level. At the weekends, my dad was usually busy with softball matches, socializing with friends, so my brother and I often spend the time alone with my mom or one of our grandmothers.

My mother, Jarmila Knoblochová, M.D., born Bartůňková, dedicated her life to other people. She worked as a doctor all her life, and she had a huge number of friends. She remembered not only their birthdays and name days, but also the birthdays of her friends' partners, children and grandchildren. She would give presents to them all. I have always admired her for this ability, but my memory was never as good as hers. Sometimes, I'm having a hard time remembering all my kids' birthdays, and don't even get me started on their name days. I don't try to remember other people's birthdays at all. I hate shopping, and buying presents is always exhausting for me. When my mother died, the number of Christmas presents decreased dramatically in our home, so I decided to work on myself a little bit in order to keep Christmas memorable, but it's still not my strong suit.

I only have one sibling. My brother, Jan Knobloch, M.Sc., is more than four years younger than me, and our relationship as chil-

dren was not particularly close - I didn't want to play with Legos with him, and he didn't want to do his share of household chores. However, our relationship improved as we grew older, and today, my brother's company supports my nonprofit organization, Close Neighbour.

When I was in college, I was so frustrated with my surroundings as well as with myself, that it was no longer bearable. I desperately needed to find a direction and meaning in my life. I got involved in the independent student movement and we organized a petition addressed to the Czech Secretary of Education for a more diverse teaching of ideologies at universities. At the time, all we were taught at schools was Marxism-Leninism - communist ideology in its various forms: the international labour movement, political economy, scientific communism, etc.. We tried to fight for diversification of the ideologies that are being taught - either all of them should be taught, or none of them should. The second major effort of our movement



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was the 17th November march in 1989, remembering the 50th anniversary of the funeral of Jan Opletal. The event was quite successful...

The months around the Velvet Revolution were, quite understandably, very intense. On the one hand, I felt happy and proud to finally be outside of something I believed in, something I could identify with. It was a beautiful feeling. I formed a strike committee at my university, I repeatedly stood up to the rector of my college, I represented the university on the national strike committee. But I was also disgusted by the way the various meetings were run - there were always people who obviously loved listening to themselves and just kept talking for hours... As a result, something that could have been

summed up in two sentences took four hours. Various fights broke out over various bigger or smaller seats, and the former ideology leaders began to shamelessly secure their future positions in politics or other areas.

There are a lot of theories about the Velvet Revolution - what really happened, who pulled the strings, etc.. I think everyone experienced their own personal revolution. I was very naive, I didn't understand some things that were happening around me, such as Hungary opening its borders, Germans flocking to the West German embassy in Prague... Yet even before the revolution, I was already secretly copying banned texts from my father's computer about the conditions in the 1950s. I certainly wasn't manipulated by anyone. That applies to the time during the revolution

or at any other time, although there have been people who have tried to manipulate me.

After the revolution, the Red Cross organized a project where about 50 Romanian and Roma children from an orphanage came to Strakonice, Czech Republic, and stayed for a month. They hired a couple of students to take care of the children during that time. My friend Majda and I were among them. It was my first encounter with Roma children and a great experience I could later build on. I was in charge of five children and I took care of them all day long. Food was delivered for us, so we didn't have to cook. At that time, I did not believe it was possible to take care of five children all day long, while having to do shopping and cooking too. When I was preparing for this project, I was

learning Romanian phrases like: "Sleep tight, my little girl", "I love you", "Thank you", etc.. When the children arrived, I soon realized I rather need to learn phrases like: "Don't touch it", "Calm down!", "Take turns". I set ground rules that I insisted on: "No jumping out of windows", "No throwing stones at each other", "Being careful not to get hit by a car" and "Take turns" for activities they all liked. During that time, I learned a lot about raising children, and I lost a lot of my ideals. I really loved the kids, but sometimes, I would lose my nerve, or feel completely helpless. And it was the first time I prayed from the bottom of my heart. I remember I sat in the middle of the frozen field, crying and calling to God: "God, if you are up there, please help these kids, because I can't do it all alone." I still remember some of the names: Gíca Pruju, Dana Lupu, Natálie, Rozálka...



The search for values and for the purpose of my own life led me towards the spiritual topics. At first, I was reading various occult books about afterlife, zodiac signs and ghosts. My spiritual journey was a long process. I was exploring Buddhism for a while, then various Christian churches – the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, The Seventh-day Adventist Church – it was a mess for me back then. My first experience with Christianity was through my grandmother, Libuše, who loved to organize everyone around her. At Christmas, my grandfather and I went to church to see the Nativity scene. My grandmother scolded me more



than once for being so unruly and disobedient, and she said it was because I didn't believe in God. So, I asked how I could do it to believe in God. I wanted to read the Bible, which my grandmother didn't have, but she taught me a prayer: "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ..." I prayed that for a while at bedtime as a child, but it didn't improve my relationship with God and neither with my grandmother. In the vacuum following the revolution, I did not quite know where to start searching for the ultimate truth and meaning.

But then something happened while I was in nature, and it was such a powerful experience with God that I will never forget it. I can walk away from God, I can make mistakes – which is what I do – but I cannot say that there is no God and believe it I simply know there is a God. But despite knowing this, I had a difficult time in Christian churches. Maybe it's because I'm not particularly easy to get along with. I will occasionally influence a church community here and there a little, sometimes I leave one church for another, I am rarely kicked out. Overall, I'm always trying to fit in somewhere, because all my life I've needed people around me to show me a mirror, give me feedback. I live too fast sometimes.

In the autumn of 1991, for the first time, I honestly admitted to myself that I want to live with God, that I was ashamed of the mistakes I had made, that I believed that God sent His only Son Jesus Christ to Earth and that He died for my sins, that I wanted Jesus to guide me in my life because He is the King and the Lord. In Christianity, this is called conversion, the moment when I truly embraced God. This happened in Pilsen.

In 1992, I began working with Roma children and brought them to church where I was a member at that time. I could not understand why others weren't as enthusiastic about their presence as I was. Once I took a couple of them (about 15 children) to the wedding of an important member of the church. The children secretly brought a kitten with them and the scared kitten meowed at completely inappropriate moments. If looks could kill, I wouldn't have survived till the end of the ceremony. Eventually, the church asked me not to bring any more Roma children to church. I broke down in tears and went back to Prague where my parents lived.

In 1994, I got married after a short period of dating, and gave birth to five children in six years and four months. My first husband and me moved to a different place every two years, so only two of my children were born in the same city. We lived in Prague, Vlašim, two places in Šluknov, two places in Humpolec, and then in Metánov. During the time we were together, we also completed a month-long course for missionaries in Havířov, spent a month in Russia as missionaries at a summer camp, and spent five months in Ukraine. Everywhere we lived, I was drawn to Roma children. Everywhere we went, we had a few friends in the Romani community, I organized activities for their children and tried to help in whatever way I could.

In 2006, my children and me left my husband and after long and exhausting series of trials, we got divorced. Leaving the father of my five children was one of the hardest decisions of my life. One thing that helped me back then was a documentary about women who experienced domestic abuse. "One thing

you can be sure of: it will get worse." The documentary featured physically abused women, and I envied some of them because they had bruises or something to show as evidence. I didn't. I was abused emotionally and had nothing to show as evidence.

My parents told me that they could see that we weren't getting along well, and that they will understand if I leave him. At some point, I swallowed all my pride, called them and asked them if we could stay with them for a while. They said yes. We were living with my parents for three months until I found a suitable flat in Pilsen. I wanted to get back in touch with my Roma children and their meowing kittens.

It came naturally that I started working with the whole families, soon. My own





predicaments and challenges helped me refrain from judging other people too fast. A lot of mothers of the Roma children I work with are my friends and I love them dearly. I can relate to stories in which everything in life doesn't work out the way we expect... Do you have a bunch of kids with a partner who has been unhelpful and useless, and you don't know what to do about it? I can feel you. Don't give up, let's talk about it! After I left my husband, I wasn't able to read the Bible for about a year. I explained it to God and He understood it. I knew it was just a matter of time before I recovered, and today, the Bible is an important part of my life again.

I lived with my kids alone for six years. It wasn't exactly easy. My ex-husband was



constantly suing us, dragging us through courts. The lawsuits were always an extremely depressing experience. It felt unreal and absolutely crazy. It wasn't until my youngest daughter turned 18 that he stopped being able to sue us. So, he switched to another strategy how to make our lives miserable. He approaches our friends, the churches we attend, doctors, employers, the Roma children we work with, and tells everyone his side of the story in which he is the hero and martyr and we are the bad guys.

I home-schooled my children until 5th grade. Only my youngest daughter went to school one year sooner than others because she didn't want to be alone at home without her siblings. Homeschooling was very practical,

because when we moved to another place, the kids did not have to change schools. Homeschooling was awesome. We got up whenever we wanted, we never had to learn after noon. When there was enough snow, we went skiing. When it was hot, we went swimming. Most of the time, the kids didn't even notice that I was teaching them something, we talked a lot about everything.

When we were working with Roma children, we taught them in a similar way. We often comment on life around us, pointing out connections and defining the major crossroads in life that require careful decisions - choosing the life partner, school, job, dealing with addictions and other temptations. As a good mother, I consider my children to be the best in the world and I am very proud of them all. The fact that they continue to be involved with Roma children in our organization, Close Neighbour, even after they grew up, feels undeserved and awesome! They all survived my parenting and education - that is another reason why I am proud of them! The oldest, Pavla, has already completed her university education, Johana is a teacher, Ester is a dentist, and Koli and Marie are working on

their university degree. My own children are my biggest project in life. If there's one thing I could wish for, it is for my children to be happy.

My second husband, Aleš, is a hero. He married a woman with five children of her own, and a bunch of Roma children and families she interacts with all the time. It wasn't always easy. Funnily enough, Aleš also has five children from his first marriage, but they're all boys. I have four daughters and one son, so our families were like two different cultures. Aleš, like me, was taking care of his children as well as other children, he was a leader of a Pathfinder Club (an organization similar to Scouts) for boys from mostly Christian backgrounds - again, a little different culture than the kids in our organization. Aleš entered our life, our organization and brought a lot of great things with him. For example, he builds us a Scout-type camp every year - with tents, teepees, and a field kitchen. Until then, we always rented a building as an accommodation. Aleš also improved the graphic design of our presentation and encouraged us to be more organized.

But not everything is always great. One weekend, he came to support me at an event with Romani teenagers in Prague. The kids were very unruly and as we were preparing to go back, they kept arguing about who would sit in the third row



of seats in the car. One of the girls decided to secure her place by jumping into the trunk of the car (we have a van), running over all the luggage and crawling into the back seat she wanted, not caring about the fact there was already a boy sitting in it. The boy had recently undergone leg surgery and still had screws in his legs. Aleš got angry, so he pulled her out of the car again and told her: "Is this how you get in the car?" Another girl saw this and started being rude to Aleš. Aleš is a tough man, he served in the army, he's a carpenter, but even he heard some of the swear words for the first time. She cursed his mother, until Aleš finally had enough and decided to, well, discipline them. It was an intense scene and the ladies got all offended. But unfortunately, this wasn't the end of the story. Half a year later, Aleš went to our



Children's club to repair the floor for us, free of charge. In the meantime, I went to greet the women who were sitting on the benches. When I looked back in my husband's direction, there were five men hitting Aleš with their fists. I immediately ran to them, jumped right in the middle and started shouting. Surprisingly, they stopped. We kept shouting at each other for a while, until they eventually walked away. A police car arrived shortly after – they saw the incident on the camera. The police wanted to write a report about the attackers. I knew that at least two of them were on probation, because they had recently been released for good behaviour in the middle of their prison sentences. I knew their wives and children. I knew how hard it was for them when their fathers were in prison. I was very grateful to the police for



arriving so quickly, which definitely helped calm things down. I was very grateful that Aleš did not file the report. His nose was bleeding and his ribs were bruised. He had to sleep on his back for about a month.

At that moment, I was seriously considering walking away from it all I told Aleš that if he wants, I will quit my work at Close

Neighbour. But Aleš is not a lady, and he knows me well. "What else would you be doing? It wouldn't be you anymore." He concluded. Time has healed the wounds, and now when I meet those ladies and their dads, we are on friendly terms. We've enjoyed a lot of good things together too - all's well that ends well.

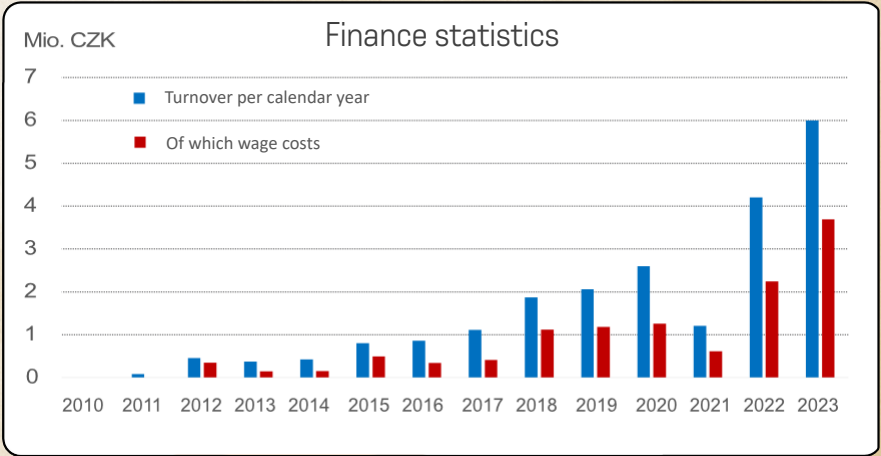


The goal is clear.
The path is arduous but beautiful. And we will keep going...

11. Statistics

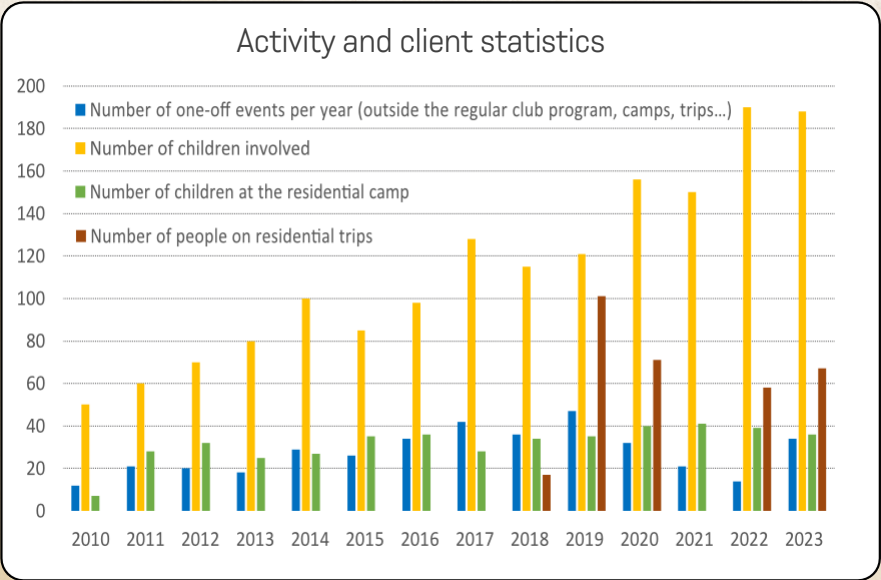
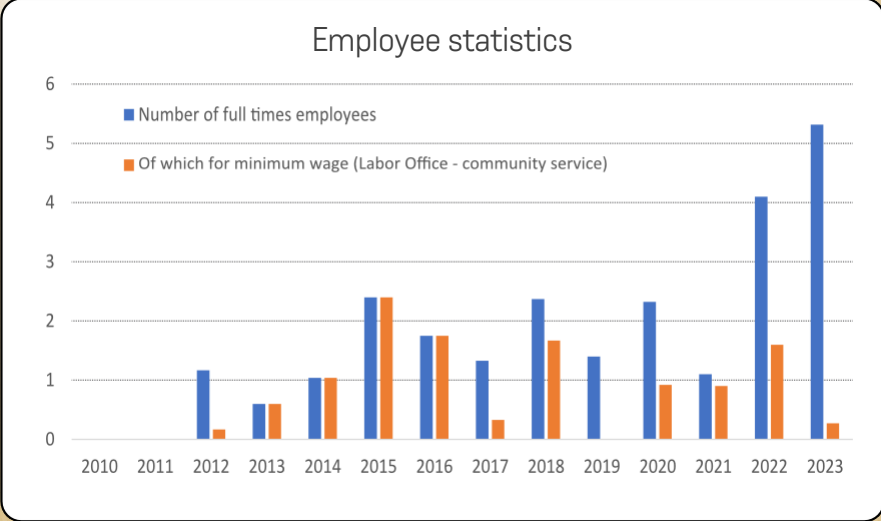


Statistics may be boring, but it shows valuable data! This chapter is dedicated to graphs, data and statistics that might not be as colorful and interesting as photos and stories, but they tell a story of their own. The data shows how dedicated, economical and efficient the organization has been since its foundation, even with minimal resources and staff available. At the same time, the data demonstrates the significant shift that has taken place in recent years, resulting from making our activities more professional.



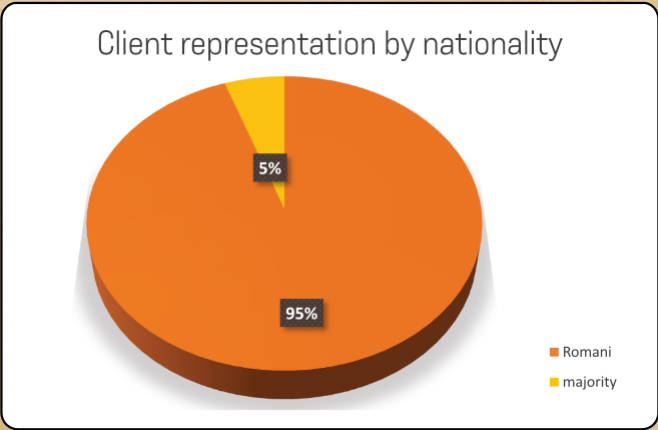
At the beginning, our activities were paid out of pocket from the personal resources of the organization's founder (at that time a single mother with five children). After a couple of years, the first grants and donations from foundations or local councils started coming. The year 2018 brought the opportunity to expand the organization's activities and to hire its first full-time employees, thanks to the first big projects (European projects from 2018, Norwegian projects from 2022). The financial turnover of the organization shows constant growth (except for 2021 - a consequence of the global pandemic, unclear future, and the transition from the European projects (2018 - 2020) to the Norwegian project (2022 - 2024)).

For a long time after the organization was founded, its activities heavily relied on volunteers. In the first years, the organization did not employ anyone, later on 1-2 people. These employees worked for mostly a minimum wage, compensated by the Czech Labour Office as part of their Public Benefit Project. We are happy that we have been able to employ more people in the recent years. It enabled us to be more professional and provide better support to our target community.

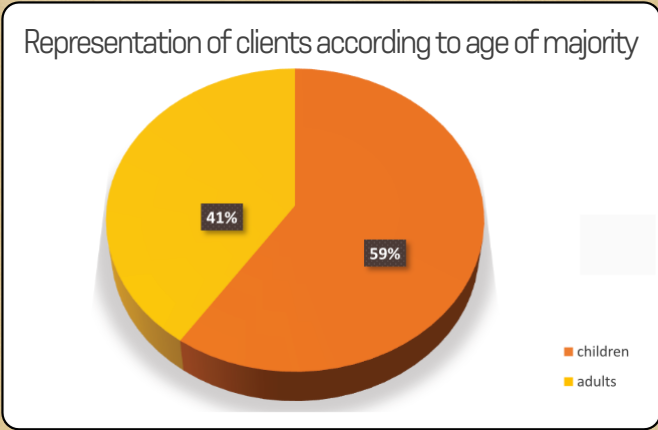


The number of our clients and activities has expanded over the years. In recent years, we have focused primarily on working more extensively with our current clients (see the chart on activities) rather than on attracting new clients. In addition to our current activities for groups, we have been adding more individual support sessions, mostly related to education, employment, parenting, financial literacy and other areas that are based on the client's circumstances and needs.

Sources of the charts: Our own processing using the database of 316 clients from the year 2023. Annual reports of Close Neighbour available on the organization's website.

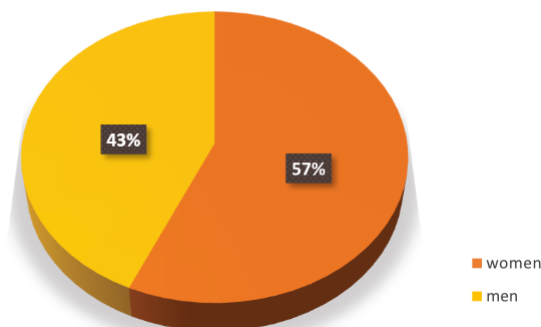


95% Roma people - We work with socially disadvantaged families, mostly from the Roma community. We are dedicated to solving their specific problems (different language, racism), but also encourage them to develop their cultural heritage (Roma music, dance, family ties, etc.).



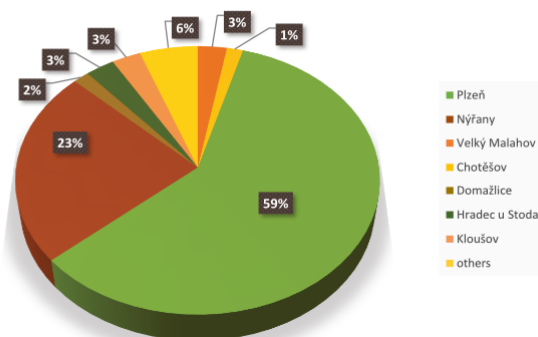
When the organization was founded in 2010, children made up almost 100% of the clients. The adult members of the community were not interested in cooperating with us. This has gradually changed thanks to many years of positive experience. Nowadays, whole families are often involved. Over time, the ratio has changed to 2 adults to 3-4 children, which is the average adults-to-kids ratio in the families we work with.

Representation of clients by gender



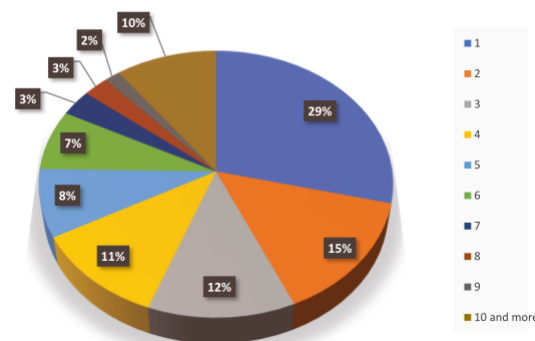
57% of our clients are women - We focus on whole families, but some of them are single mothers (fathers unknown, in prison, not with family), and some of the fathers do not take part in family activities. Overall, however, there has been a growing interest on the part of the fathers, which is something we are happy about.

Client representation by place of residence



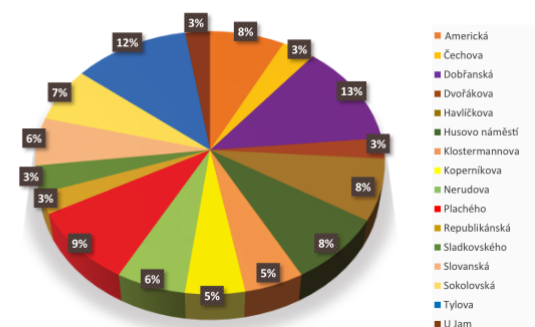
59% of our clients live in Pilsen. At the beginning of our activities, 100% of them were from Pilsen. Our reach has gradually expanded to other towns and villages outside Pilsen. Another town with 23 % of our clients is Nyřany (the local excluded locality, in which one of our Romani colleagues lives). We regularly travel to the other locations to visit our clients: Hradec u Stoda and Kloušov. We got to know these families when they still lived in Pilsen. They decided to move because of the more economically available housing offers and the lower incidence of negative phenomena in the city centre (drug addicts, homeless people, pawnshops, gambling houses...). However, the locations are difficult to access with public transport and there are very limited options when it comes to leisure activities and support services. Which is why we continue to work with these families in their new homes. Our outreach work with families has been working especially since the pandemic times.

Number of types of activities used



Participation of clients in our activities (extra-curricular activities, tutoring, educational sessions, events for children, events for families, residential summer camps, non-residential summer camps, educational trips for families with children...). 71% of clients participate in two or more activities. We strive to provide comprehensive support to families with children.

Representation of clients residing in Pilsen by street



Our clients live in localities in Pilsen that are listed as socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. For example, a research paper published by the Faculty of Science of Charles University in Prague, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, mentions these streets as locations of segregation with the following concentrations of socially excluded persons: Plachého (9 %), Husovo náměstí (8 %), Kopernikova (5 %), Tylova (12%). The study adds: "Pilsen is not often associated in the Czech media with the problem of socially excluded localities and people at risk of social exclusion. However, the annual increase in the number of articles dealing with this topic and the increase in the number of localities discussed in the press points to a long-standing and expanding problem."

Source: Analysis of Segregation in the City of Pilsen, 2017, pp. 35


Norway
grants

This publication was produced within the framework of the project: Support of cooperation, education and awareness in the field of Roma inclusion. The project was supported by Norwegian funds. The project partner was the Norwegian organization Skyhøyt live scene.



As I was writing this book, I realized with great gratitude how many people have joined us on our journey and how many people were, or have been a part of our mission.

My greatest thanks go to my family.

I am especially grateful to my children, Pavla Macháňová, Johanka Bělohoubková, Ester, Valentin a Marie Papazianovi, who walked through all the rough patches with me, who were helping me with everyday struggles. I am grateful to my husband, Aleš Fáber, not just for all the technical support, but also and for helping me keep my feet on the ground. I would also like to thank my sons-in-law Radek Macháň and Marek Bělohoubek, who were not discouraged by the fact that our family is involved with the Roma community in Pilsen.

I would like to thanks Matěj Brzica for lending me an off-road car and providing moral support, my mother Jarmila Knoblochová for not giving up on us, my father Pavel Knobloch, for providing storage space for our summer camp equipment, my brother Jan Knobloch and his company for their financial support, my father-in-law Karel Fáber for his care and support, my aunt Helena Winterová for care and gifts for children, my godmother and aunt Vendulka Smetáčková for her prayers, interest and support...



We are also deeply indebted to all other supporters, volunteers and partners! There is a complete list of them in heaven, and an incomplete list below:

Early collaborators from the time our organization was founded:

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Our current employees and collaborators:

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Former employees:

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